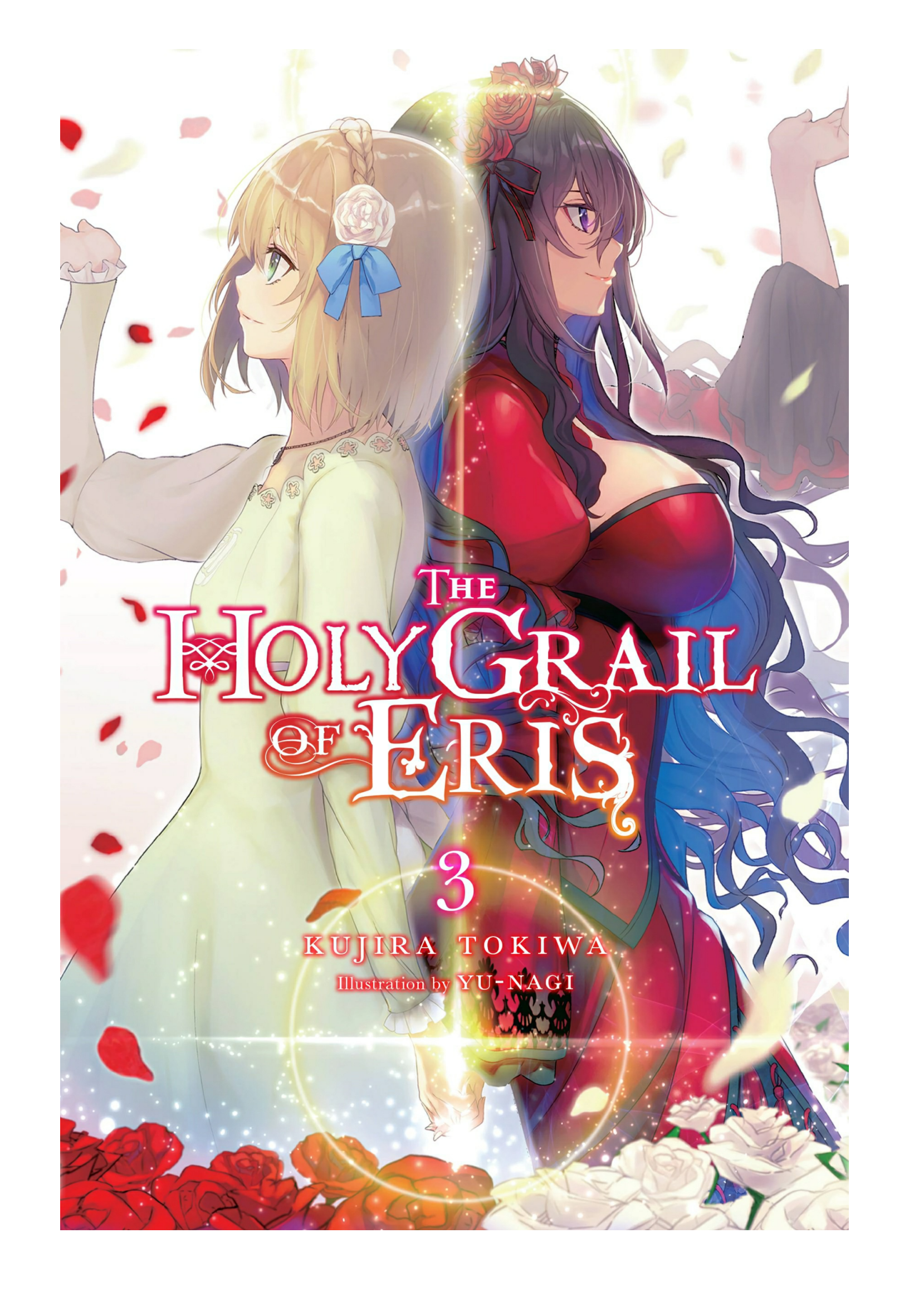




THE HOLY GRAIL OF ERIS

3

KUJIRA TOKIWA

Illustration by YU-NAGI



THE
HOLY GRAIL
OF ERIS
3





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Characters



The green-eyed
girl stood
slowly, took a
deep breath—

**And
slapped
Adolphus
hard
across the
cheek.**



“...Miss Grail?”

The rain suddenly stopped.

No—he could still hear it
pounding down and see it
splashing onto the ground.

It just wasn't hitting
him anymore.

Thinking this was rather
suspicious, he turned around
and saw a familiar face.

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Exclusive Short Story

Smiles Bloom

The Holy Grail of Eris

author Kujira Tokiwa

illustration Yu-nagi

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KUJIRA TOKIWA

ILLUSTRATION BY YU-NAGI


NEW YORK

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KUJIRA TOKIWA

Translation by Winifred Bird

Cover art by Yu-nagi

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Light filtering through the curtains woke Connie. She rubbed her eyes and stifled a yawn. She'd had a hard time falling asleep the previous night.

According to the letter Lily Orlamunde had left behind, Faris had been trying to invade Adelbide—its supposed ally—ten years earlier. San and Eularia, who were supporters of Princess Alexandra, had said the same thing. But according to them, the plan had failed at the last minute. The reason?

Why, the execution of Scarlett Castiel, of course.

What in the world could San have meant by that?

Connie shook her head and climbed out from under the covers. She walked over to the window and threw aside the curtain. Sunlight poured in, illuminating the dim room.

She squinted. Behind her, someone snorted.

"This damn weather is so perfect, it's depressing."

Scarlett's disdainful tone was the same as always. But Connie detected a hint of unease, perhaps the result of San's words.

San had left without explaining what she meant—talk about evasive. The revelation had shocked Connie, but she wasn't sure about Scarlett's reaction. When she tried to remember, everything was hazy. In other words, mouthy Scarlett had kept her thoughts to herself for once.

And that hadn't changed. Her continued silence about the previous day's events struck Connie as unnatural.

Connie stared at her. Noticing this, Scarlett scowled back suspiciously.

"What?"

"Nothing, I was just wondering if...you're okay."

"Me?"

Her well-shaped eyebrows shot up. It seemed she was as short-tempered as

ever. Just as the room's atmosphere was beginning to chill, someone knocked on the door.

Grateful, Connie called out, "Yes?"

Marta opened the door, looking slightly frazzled. "Oh, I'm so glad you're awake. Sir Ulster is here."

"His Excellency?" Connie asked, blinking in surprise. She didn't remember making a date with him.

"He said he happened to be in the neighborhood," Marta explained. "What shall I tell him, miss?"

Connie opened the door of her wardrobe in a panic. "I'll get dressed right away, so please ask him to wait a moment—"

"I guessed as much. I've already shown him into the drawing room. He appears to be off work today. I've brought him some tea as well, so you just take your time and get dressed, miss. Did you hear me? *Take your time*. I won't have you going out there in one of your usual slapdash outfits, with your hair barely brushed. And remember, however anxious you feel, a lady must not run!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Connie replied smartly, slipping off her nightgown, grabbing the first dress her hand touched, and pulling it over her head.

Ignoring Marta's screeches of admonishment, Connie flew out of the room, still tugging a comb through her hair.

She was sorry about not listening to Marta, but the only reason she could think of for Randolph dropping in to see her like this was Daeg Gallus. The fact that he hadn't sent word in advance surely meant there must be some emergency.

Or so she thought.

But for some reason, when she got to the drawing room and sat down, the young man across from her, dressed all in black, remained silent as he stirred a cube of sugar into his tea.

Connie was sure the sugar must have fully dissolved by now, but the

unspeakably solemn atmosphere emanating from His Excellency kept her silent, too.

Finally, Randolph stopped stirring.

“Actually...,” he began. His unusually stern expression sent a nervous shiver down her back. “...I went to the Castiel residence the other day.”

He fell silent. Around the time his tea was becoming lukewarm, she tilted her head in confusion and finally managed to ask, “And...?”

He looked the same as always. She was used to his masculine features and bearing by now. Since he was off work, he wasn’t wearing his military uniform, but she wasn’t surprised to see him nevertheless dressed as if he were on his way to a funeral. She had known Randolph Ulster long enough by now to understand certain things about him. For example, he didn’t much care for sweet things, but he did enjoy nut cookies. He preferred tea to coffee. She had learned all sorts of things about him over the past two weeks.

That was how she knew he was acting a little strangely today. No, more than a little. Right this very moment, he was adding three more cubes of sugar to his tea. Normally he didn’t even add one.

Watching the fourth sugary victim drop from his fingers into the teacup with a plop, she made up her mind to speak.

“And, um, did something happen?”

Randolph widened his eyes slightly, then glanced around restlessly.

“...Hmm?”

He really was acting strangely. Normally his forbidding expression made even military men shake in their boots, but today it was utterly transparent. Connie vaguely remembered reading in *Young Lady’s Friend*, her favorite magazine, that in a situation like this, a lady ought to pretend she’d noticed nothing, and now she’d gone and said something. She couldn’t think of any way to smooth it over, either.

They stared at each other for a moment.

Scarlett was the one who broke the silence with a discontented snort.

“I’m the one who ought to be depressed right now,” she said.

“...Why?”

“Randolph Ulster went to my house, didn’t he? That can only mean one thing. It was my father’s fault.”

“...Whaaat?”

Although Connie couldn’t make sense of Scarlett’s words, she had a feeling she’d just said something terribly important.

“If we can believe what those two women from Faris said, my execution allowed the kingdom to avoid war with their country, did it not?” she continued.

Connie recalled the words of the woman with hair like sunshine.

“Deep down, I always knew my father would sell his own daughter without a second’s hesitation if it would help the kingdom.”

“The Duke Castiel?!” Connie shouted.

Randolph looked away.

“Your Excellency!” she said in an unintentionally accusing tone. Why was he being so obvious today?

“I knew it,” Scarlett said with a shrug.

Adolphus Castiel had sent his own daughter to the executioner’s block.

Connie was in shock. Could it possibly be true? Could such a thing happen? Something so cruel?

She reflexively glanced at Scarlett, who looked innocently back at her as if nothing at all was wrong. But for some reason, to Connie, she looked like she was about to cry.

Connie hesitated for only a second.

“...Let’s go, Scarlett.”

“Go where?”

“Let’s go talk to the duke right now,” she said, gazing into Scarlett’s amethyst

eyes. Scarlett gaped at her, and Randolph groaned.

“Miss Grail—”

“What, Your Excellency? It’s no use trying to stop us.”

“...The duke isn’t an easy man to gain access to,” Randolph said reproachfully, after some hesitation. True enough, Adolphus Castiel was a high noble rumored to be nearly as powerful as the king himself. Not so long ago, Connie wouldn’t have dreamed of trying to see him. But she had changed.

“If I fail today, there’s always tomorrow. If I fail tomorrow, there’s always the next day. And the day after that. As long as I don’t give up, he’s sure to see me eventually. So I’ll go to see him today.”

She knew now that as long as she didn’t give up, a path would open before her.

No matter how hard the battle, there was always a way forward.

Randolph drew his brows together, sighed like he was suppressing a headache, and turned toward Connie.

“...I see. In that case, I will arrange for you to meet the duke. Please wait a few days. Do you understand? You must wait. Do not even consider doing something as foolish as trying to sneak into a mansion that closely guarded.”

For some reason, he was very insistent in his warning.

Honestly, what kind of person did he take her for? She was the plain, average, unremarkable daughter of a viscount. That was all.

Obviously, she pretended with all her might not to hear when Scarlett jokingly said, “Oh dear, he’s seen right through us!”

Thanks to His Excellency the Grim Reaper’s earnest efforts to restrain his fiancée, plans were made for her to meet Duke Castiel two days later, on the condition that he accompany her himself.

“Does that man intend to become your watchdog?”

As usual, Scarlett was perched on the dresser with the three-paneled mirror in Connie’s room. The rounded edge must have made a comfortable seat,

because it had become her standard spot.

Although her spiteful tone and exasperated shrug at first seemed typical, Connie thought Scarlett's expression looked slightly lackluster.

Maybe Connie was imagining things. But having gotten the idea in her head, she couldn't get it out. She bit her lip. Shaking her head to clear away her doubts, she summoned her courage.

"Let's go for a walk!" she suggested brightly.

"A walk?"

"Yes! I've heard that spending time in the sun improves your mood! Not that I think y-you need to improve your mood, of course!"

She had intended to sound casual, but it came off a little forced. Scarlett gave her a hard stare, then snorted.

"Fine, but I'll tell you something else I've heard. Spending time in the sun turns dead people to ash."

They wandered aimlessly down the tree-lined street outside the Grail residence. The summer sun beat down as strong as ever. Connie shaded her eyes against the white light. Just then, she heard someone behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a woman with a dark hood pulled low over her eyes standing on the sidewalk. When Connie flinched, the woman raised her hood.

The cloth fell away to reveal curly red hair and gray-green eyes. Connie knew those features infuriatingly well.

"A-Amel—!"

"Shh! Be quiet. That woman will kill me if she finds out I'm still in the kingdom."

"What?!"

Quite a thing to say, Connie thought to herself. But Amelia Hobbes ignored her confusion and quickly pulled some papers from the bosom of her dress, pressing them into Connie's hands.

"Hey, wait, what is this?!" Connie protested.

Afraid of being pulled into another mess, Connie tried to return the papers, but Amelia had already backed away.

“Go ahead, keep them. They contain all the information I’ve collected about Crown Princess Cecilia,” Amelia said proudly. “The rest is up to you.”

“...Huh?”

Connie was bewildered.

Amelia must have sensed her confusion, because she turned around as she was leaving and raised her eyebrows in irritation.

“You really are dense...! I’m telling you to use this information to throw that woman in jail! You like that sort of thing, don’t you?”

No, Connie didn’t. Not one bit. She shook her head, but Amelia seemed not to see. Incomprehensible.

“Do a good job of it, all right? I’ll be back when the fuss blows over. I have high expectations for you, Constance Grail!” she announced arrogantly, before slipping into a two-horse carriage that must have been waiting for her. The carriage clattered off at a furious pace.

Connie looked back and forth between the bundle of papers in her hand and the cloud of dust on the road.

“What just happened...?” she mumbled.



“—And that about sums it up.”

Connie had gone straight from her encounter with Amelia to the O’Brian residence, where she told Abigail and the others about how the redheaded reporter had ambushed her.

Aldous Clayton looked like he had just discovered a dead fish by the side of the road.

“...Amelia went missing a few days ago,” he said. “I was sure someone made her disappear to shut her up—but she seems to be more stubborn than I realized.”

The papers from Amelia appeared to be an unfinished article. It was covered in red lines, arrows, and notes, which made it nearly impossible to read. No doubt she had planned to make a clean copy and submit it to some publisher.

As far as Connie could tell from a quick skim, there were some exaggerations, but basically the article said that Crown Princess Cecilia's mother had been a prostitute, that Kevin Jennings discovered the truth and was subsequently debilitated by drug addiction, and that the hospital he was staying at was run by a charitable organization directed by Princess Cecilia.

Crown Princess Cecilia, having received the management rights to Saint Nicholas Hospital from the earl, Calvin Campbell...

Something caught Connie's eye, and she stopped reading.

Kalvin Campbell. She'd heard that name before. Very recently, too.

"My, my, it's our friend the judge. The one who was planning to hand down an unjust verdict for Abigail," Scarlett said.

"...That's right!"

Kimberly Smith had dealt with him after she learned he'd been cooking books at the Violet Association. Connie tried to remember what else she knew about him.

According to an anonymous source, the earl handed over the hospital under pressure from Comptroller of the Treasury S, a loyal supporter of Crown Princess Cecilia. S, originally an army man, is said to be in line for the position of Comptroller-General of the Treasury...

Someone was tittering. Connie looked up. It was Abigail.

"This article is supposed to be an exposé of Cecilia, but it actually contains something even more interesting. I'm sure Amelia didn't even realize it."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, myself...," Connie admitted apologetically.

"After my trial, I wanted to know what Calvin Campbell's relationship to Daeg Gallus was, so I poked around a little," she explained. "He may not look it, but he's actually quite cunning, it seems. I learned he's been laundering money in more places than just the Violet Association. Until now, I didn't know where he

was getting it.”

She paused to smile mischievously before continuing.

“Comptroller of the Treasury S is most likely Simon Darkian. Do you know who he is? Deborah’s husband, who married into the Darkian family.”

“Deborah’s husband...?”

Connie couldn’t forget Deborah even if she wanted to. She was the glamorous, cruel woman who had tried to pass judgment on Connie in the Starlight Room in the Grand Merillian and had been involved in human trafficking at the Earl John Doe Ball.

“The article says the earl gave up the hospital under pressure, but Campbell is utterly corrupt. I have no doubt he demanded a reward. Considering Simon’s position...perhaps he asked him to turn a blind eye to his ill-gotten cash.”

Connie was still confused. “But why did they want him to give up the hospital?”

“This is only a guess, but it seems likely they were doing clinical tests of Jackal’s Paradise there. Under the pretext of treatment, of course. If the oh-so-charitable crown princess was involved, no one would ask too many questions even if their activities were a little suspicious. The question is, just who is Simon, the middleman? Although the answer is fairly clear by now.”

Just then, Scarlett seemed to remember something.

“That reminds me,” she muttered. “Simon was having an affair with Aisha’s cousin ten years ago.”

Aisha’s cousin?

Connie blinked, unsure what Scarlett was talking about. It sounded vaguely familiar, though. After a moment, she remembered that the rumor was about Sharon Spencer, who had died the same day as Aisha.

She recalled the conversation she’d had with a friend after bumping into her at Sharon’s funeral.

It was back when Sharon was engaged...so it must have been about ten years ago.

Apparently, she was seeing someone other than her fiancé.

Can you guess who she was seeing?

Simon Darkian.

“...You said the Jackal’s Paradise going around today is very different from what people used to use—that they changed it to suit their needs,” Scarlett said. “Which means they must have tested it on people before actually *putting it to use*. After all, things don’t always work out how you think they will. I’m sure there were failures. Ten years ago, Sharon was a quiet, obedient girl. The kind who would never go against someone in a higher position.”

Just before Aisha died, she had told Aldous to talk to Sharon. Ten years ago, Aisha had stolen a bottle of weight-loss tonic from her cousin. She had used it to harm Cecilia, not knowing it was poison.

Scarlett had said it herself.

Maybe it was Jackal’s Paradise in that bottle.

When she’d said it, it had been a mere possibility. But what if the “weight-loss tonic” really was a failed version of Jackal’s Paradise from when it was still being tested?

A chill ran down Connie’s back. Was Deborah’s husband a member of Daeg Gallus? And what about Deborah herself?

“...Aisha Huxley,” Scarlett said in a low voice as Connie hugged herself to keep from shaking. “Enrique. Cecilia. Daeg Gallus. Those sly foxes from Faris, and my father. And now the Darkians?”

Unmistakable fury emanated from her subdued voice.

“All of them...!”

Her amethyst eyes glinted with violent emotion. They were so beautiful, Connie couldn’t help staring.

“I’ve had all the rudeness I can stomach! How am I supposed to know who to exact revenge on when everything is such a mess?! How about thinking about me for a change?!”

But her words were absurd.

“Well, I’m going to tear that ridiculous plot called the Holy Grail of Eris to pieces and slap silly each and every fool who had a hand in my execution...!”

Wait one second! Connie wanted to say as Scarlett let her feelings explode in a torrent. True, Connie had made up her mind to help Scarlett get revenge. She had no objection to that. Scarlett might have a slightly problematic personality, but nevertheless, she was an innocent person who had been driven to her death. The responsible parties deserved to be punished. Punished in a proper and just way, of course.

But that wasn’t the problem right now.

The problem was who, exactly, was going to slap all those eminent personages Scarlett had just named?



Scarlett stamped her foot. Her father had promised her over a month ago that today he would take her to see the play everyone was raving about. She hadn’t had her father all to herself in a long time, and she had been eagerly counting down the days.

And now this?

“Father doesn’t care about me at all!” she shouted angrily.

The message saying he wouldn’t be able to make it home arrived just after she had put on her new dress and had the maid pile her hair into a fetching updo.

What a fool she must have looked, spinning around in front of the mirror, so pleased with herself. She picked up whatever was closest at hand and hurled it onto the floor.

“He always does this! Always! Father hates me, I’m sure of it! He never even kisses my cheek before bedtime...!”

A muddled mix of feelings welled up in her chest. She bit her lip, trying not to cry.

“—Your father may look clever, but in fact, he’s a very awkward man,” a

soothing voice told her. “Please don’t be angry with him. Oh, and he’s also extremely stubborn.”

“Are you telling me to simply put up with it, Mother?!”

Scarlett looked up. Her mother, Aliénore, giggled.

“Not in the least. You’ve done nothing wrong. At times like this, there are other ways. I’m going to tell you a magic phrase that has been passed down in my family over the years.”

“Magic...?”

“Yes. A magic spell you must remember,” Scarlett’s mother whispered, her amethyst eyes glittering with excitement. “If you have a complaint, tell it to Cornelia Faris.”



Adolphus smiled wryly.

The fiancée whom Randolph had somewhat pushily insisted on bringing over to introduce only looked more ordinary the longer he examined her. The way she kept glancing around nervously reminded him of some small animal.

Constance Grail.

The impression he got from seeing her was completely incongruous with her actions over the past few months. At first, he had wondered if someone else was pulling the strings, but that suspicion had vanished when she became engaged to Randolph Ulster. He had too high an opinion of Randolph for that, even discounting the natural partiality he felt toward the son of his deceased friend.

But Adolphus still didn’t understand why he had come.

He could hardly imagine it was genuinely to introduce his fiancée.

“I’m a busy man. Did the *sincere* young lady want to ask me something?” he asked provocatively, thinking of the many ways in which this girl was going against the Grail family motto. She hesitated, as if trying to decide whether it was really all right to speak her mind. She looked up timidly at Randolph, who was sitting next to her. Only when he nodded did she seem to make her

decision.

Her green eyes took in Adolphus.

“Duke, are you the one who sent Scarlett to the executioner’s block?”

Adolphus’s eyes widened at her words and the force of will that filled them.

He had taken her for the kind of ordinary girl you could find anywhere. He let out a low laugh at her unexpectedly steely nerve.

“If I am, what will you do?”

Constance Grail turned down her mouth in consternation. “...That would be a bit of a problem.”

“For me? Or for you?”

“For both of us,” she mumbled. Apparently, the spirit animating her a moment ago had vanished, because she looked ready to die.

Somehow, her open display of nerves caught him off guard and made him speak when he otherwise might not have.

“What are you doing this for?” he asked.

Those green eyes blinked. “For her,” she said, like the answer was obvious.

“...You mean as an act of kindness?”

“No. It was I who received the first kindness. Now I want to return it.”

He saw nothing false in her expression. Adolphus was confused. He could think of only one person involved with all of Constance Grail’s actions—but that was impossible.

Because that person was no longer of this world.

“And what is your relationship to this benefactor? You said ‘her,’ so I assume you are not referring to this unsociable fiancé of yours.”

She glanced at the empty air before crossing her arms with a troubled look.

“Our relationship? Well, we’re a bit like friends, or perhaps like a boss and her underling, or a bully and her victim...”

As Adolphus was trying to decipher this answer, her face brightened.

“I think of her as a partner, although she might not like that term.”

Her smile was as carefree as that of a small child. It was perhaps her unaffected expression that prompted him to speak.

“And this person...,” he began.

It was an absolutely absurd idea. But if this person was who Adolphus thought it was...

“...They must surely detest me.”

Constance Grail fell silent.

“...May I say something?” she asked finally.

“Of course,” Adolphus answered, nodding.

The green-eyed girl stood slowly, took a deep breath—

And slapped Adolphus hard across the cheek.



The bride from across the sea was a picture-perfect wife.

Ernst had strong-armed Adolphus into taking some time off after the wedding. That said, returning to the family domain kept him as busy as ever. In particular, the Morell River had flooded the previous year, and workers were reconstructing embankments and inspecting canals. Adolphus was occupied with meetings and inspections for most of the daytime hours, and sometimes his engagements stretched over days.

Although Aliénore ended up essentially alone in an unfamiliar land, she never once complained. To the contrary, Adolphus heard she was caring for her stepson, Maximilian, as if he were her own, even though they didn't share a drop of blood.

Her sole fault was her frail constitution. When Adolphus learned she had a fever, he returned home for the first time in a week.

Aliénore was resting in her bedroom. When he asked how she felt, she smiled innocently.

“What?” he asked.

“You seem to be worried about me,” she replied, giggling.

“Of course I am. You are my wife.”

He stroked her forehead soothingly. Her smile widened.

“My dear...”

“What is it?”

“In the future...”

Her voice was as warm as the spring sunshine caressing his ears.

“Would you mind waiting until you’re asleep to talk nonsense?”

Adolphus raised his eyebrows in confusion. He felt like his wife had just said something strange.

He looked at her. The same placid smile was still on her lips. Had he imagined it? As he was thinking this over, she continued.

“Or were you sleeping with your eyes open? That would be a problem of its own. It could be a sign of illness. Otherwise, I suggest you look up the definition of *wife* in the dictionary. A person with whom you do not share a bedroom and with whom, even when you do meet, you limit your conversation to mere greetings is not usually called a *wife*. They are called an *acquaintance*.”

Adolphus’s mouth fell open.

“Whatever is the matter?” Aliénore asked.

“Nothing... It’s just that my impression of you has changed...,” he said in a fluster.

Predictably, she giggled charmingly. “Impressions aren’t worth a damn if you’ve only met someone a handful of times.”

“Damn?” Adolphus blinked at the unexpectedly coarse word.

“Oh, pardon me. As you know, I was raised in the countryside.”

It finally dawned on him.

“...Are you angry?”

Her smile slowly widened. “As I said,” she replied.

He noticed something then.

Her jewel-like amethyst eyes were not smiling in the least.

“I would appreciate it if you waited until you’re asleep to talk nonsense, you dunderhead.”

“Dunderwhat...?”

“Dunderhead.”

“What does that mean?”

“...It’s not something a lady can say.”

She was blushing, apparently on purpose, which was enough for him to guess that the meaning wasn’t very nice.

“And I am not angry. I am praying.”

A saintly smile was pasted on her beautiful face.

“Praying that every last one of them dies.”

“...That’s not very nice.”

She giggled frivolously again. “My life has never been very nice,” she said as casually as if she were talking about the weather. “I may be a foolish little girl, but I’m not so ignorant that I don’t understand your concerns. I know that the blood in this body of mine has the power to spark a war. Although I myself would never wish for that, of course.”

A dark flame flickered in the depths of those amethyst eyes. Her gaze pierced Adolphus.

“But are you telling me that means I should simply bear the burden? Are you saying I ought to accept being treated as a prisoner until I die? That it’s right for you to show me how broad the sky is and then, when things turn bad, shut me up in a dungeon where the sun doesn’t reach? I might as well be dead!”

“That’s not—” Adolphus began, but then broke off. The girl in front of him was made not of fragile glass but of burning hot steel. He had heedlessly touched her before realizing that fact, and now he could not help withdrawing his hand from the painful heat.

Which is to say, Adolphus Castiel had been overpowered by a girl more than ten years his junior.

“I am about to say something quite rude to you.”

“...I see.”

He nodded. She smiled happily and stepped slowly toward him.

The next instant, a sharp pain shot through his cheek as her fist made contact. His cheekbone made an unpleasant sound. His head reverberated like a bell. He brought his hand to his cheek. It felt hot. A second later, pain washed over him, as if his body had finally realized what was happening. Tears sprang to his eyes. He wondered if the left side of his face might have swelled to twice its normal size.



Terrifyingly, she had not slapped him with an open palm. She had punched him.

Staggering backward, he finally managed to speak.

“...I believe the phrase *say something* generally refers to spoken words.”

“Oh, pardon me. In my part of the world, we generally speak to dunderheads with our fists.”

And what uncivilized part of the world is that? Adolphus wondered.

“I’ve thought about many things since coming to this kingdom. As it turns out, I don’t have that admirable willingness to sacrifice myself for the sake of a bunch of total strangers. So you may call me a fool and berate me as inhuman, but I plan to live life as I please.”

Aliénore had suddenly become very animated. Her amethyst eyes peered around excitedly.

“After all, those were Cornelia’s last words.”

“Cornelia...?” he echoed, wondering what the last queen of the empire had to do with anything.

“Yes,” his wife said, smiling. “So if you have a compliant, tell it to Cornelia Faris.”

That, it turned out, was a declaration of war from his bride from across the sea.

Once she had dropped her front, Aliénore was quite cutting.

“If you love to work so much, why don’t you marry the kingdom? I’ll grant you a divorce right away.”

That was what she said, her smile as gentle as a flower, when he greeted her after two weeks away.

Needless to say, her eyes were not smiling. Adolphus tried to smooth things over with a smile of his own.

“I think the load would be a little heavy for me.”

“Is that so? I think it would suit you very well.”

“...Next time I won’t stay away so long.”

“I don’t expect much from a dunderhead anyway. You know, if you don’t start taking some time off, you’ll be bald before long.”

As she had promised, Aliénore was living life as she pleased. She spent the better part of the year in the Castiel domain, hardly ever venturing to the capital. She invariably turned down invitations to balls. “I don’t like foxes and wolves,” she told Adolphus. “Not unless I’m allowed to hunt them.”

He raised no objection. Scoundrels who intended to use her bloodline for their own ends could be lurking anywhere. There was no harm in keeping her meetings with outsiders to a minimum.

Plus, although she acted tough, her body was frail. It would be difficult for her to attend all the balls even if she’d wanted to. Fortunately, her life at their country manor seemed to suit her constitution relatively well.

“Are you all right?”

Still, she always fell ill when the seasons changed. One day, Adolphus returned home toward dawn and heard her coughing in the room next to his. He knocked softly on the door.

“Come in,” she said hoarsely. He stepped into his wife’s room, which he normally did not enter at this time of night.

Aliénore was sitting up in bed, reaching for the water pitcher. She poured herself a glass, drank it down, and whispered, “...I want some hot lemonade.”

Is that all? he thought, and nodded. “I’ll have the maids make some.”

“I would feel bad waking them at this hour.”

The Republic of Soldita, Aliénore’s motherland, was a polytheistic country. The highest god, Anai, was said to preside over freedom and equality. Aliénore had grown up as a priestess at a shrine where rank had no place. Maybe that was why she was accustomed to standing before a crowd but resisted using other people.

Adolphus sighed. The mansion had servants on duty at night, but he guessed

it would do no good to tell her that.

“...Wait here.”

A few minutes later, he returned with two steaming cups. She gave him a questioning look.

“You made it yourself?”

She sounded dumbfounded.

“Weren’t you the one who didn’t want to ask the maids?” he replied, exasperated. Aliénore’s eyes widened. She timidly reached out her hand.

After blowing on the hot liquid several times, she took a sip.

“...It’s sour.”

That was her first comment. It was followed by grumbling about the fact that seeds were floating around, the pulp wasn’t properly strained out, and the honey wasn’t melted. Adolphus grew sullen and considered giving her a piece of his mind, but then he noticed how oddly happy she looked while she was complaining, and he swallowed his words.

Before he knew it, her cup was empty.

After that, every time she got sick, she pestered him for lemonade.

The seasons passed, and a fateful day arrived.

Hard at work on state business in the capital, Adolphus was able to return to the domain only a few times a year.

On that particular day, he was returning for the first time in six months. After completing an unavoidable inspection of the domain, he went to see his wife. They chatted aimlessly. That was all. Nothing about the day was unusual.

But that night, something happened.

He had lit his bedside lamp and was reading a report from the capital when he heard a knock on the door. He looked up.

Without waiting for his answer, Aliénore walked in and stood before him, smiling as if to say, *I’m not doing anything wrong.*

Adolphus set down his report and sighed, pressing his hand to his forehead.

“...Aliénore. That is not how a lady behaves.”

“Oh, but it is. After all, we are man and wife.”

Her shameless attitude reminded him of that other conversation they’d once had.

“You said our relationship was that of mere acquaintances, I believe. And sure enough, that’s what was written in the dictionary.”

“You ought to burn that garbage this instant,” she said with a shrug. “Since you’re so stubborn, I decided to take matters into my own hands.”

Adolphus groaned.

“...Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I told you, didn’t I? You may call me a fool and berate me as inhuman, but I plan to live life as I please.”

If he remembered correctly, those were Cornelia Faris’s last words. When he asked if that was the case, Aliénore nodded indifferently.

“Yes. And this is what she told her daughter,” she said in a singsong voice, climbing slowly onto his bed. “ ‘If you fall in love with someone, do not hesitate to bear that person’s child. If the gods do not forgive you, I will bear the punishment in your stead.’ That was the decision of my revered ancestress. Let me ask you, Adolphus. Are you familiar with the family motto taught to those of us who carry on the starry crown?”

“Why would I be?”

His cross glare had no effect on Aliénore. To the contrary, she seemed to find it amusing, because her lips formed an utterly bewitching smile.

“If you have a complaint, tell it to Cornelia Faris.”

What a pain. Adolphus gripped his head. He wanted to get up and leave the room. But first he had to make something clear.

“...If we did have a child...”

He grabbed Aliénore’s shoulders to stop her from edging any closer to him.

His heart quickened at the touch of her body, softer and more slender than he had expected.

“...wouldn’t you pity that child for being at the mercy of fate?”

Her face was so close, he could almost feel her breath. Her jewel-like eyes narrowed.

“As for that,” she said, without a trace of hesitation in her voice, “I’ve never once in my life pitied myself.”

Adolphus was taken aback by her flat statement. She giggled, clearly pleased with herself.

“After all, I know I came into this world wanted and loved.”

She looked into his eyes. Adolphus was at his wit’s end.

“...This is very hard to say,” he said. He didn’t know when she had fallen in love with him, but unfortunately, he could not return the sentiment.

“Aliénore. I’m sorry. I don’t love you.”

Her response to this important announcement was laughter. Then she took his hand and twined her fingers around his.

“Then withdraw your hand from mine, Adolphus Castiel.”

Her glittering eyes took in his troubled face. He felt frozen by her sudden challenge.

“You see? You can’t,” she said victoriously.

In fact, it would have been quite easy to shake off her hand—or it should have been. He knew he ought to do it. For his kingdom, and for the child that would be born.

But.

But Aliénore was smiling so happily at him.

Adolphus could not bring himself to take his hand away from hers, no matter how hard he tried.



Now she'd done it.

Connie grimaced. Her palm stung. This was the first time she had ever slapped someone, and she hadn't realized it hurt the person doing the slapping as well as the one being slapped.

Adolphus was blinking in shock. His cheek was slightly pink. She felt sorry for him even though she'd done it herself.

She glanced at His Excellency. He was peering up at the ceiling, one hand on his forehead. She wanted to disappear.

Just as she was thinking she would much rather have been punched in return, an innocent voice said, "Oh, pardon me. My mother told me that it's proper to speak to dunderheads with one's fist."

What sort of uncivilized place has manners like that?

"Um, my friend said that's the custom in her mother's hometown."

"...Custom?"

"Yes. She said it's what they do to dunderheads—not to imply that you're a dunderhead, Duke! It's just a figure of speech, or...!"

The duke's eyes widened briefly, and a second later he burst out laughing.

"I'm lucky to get off with a slap!" he said.

"What...?"

"It hurt more the last time," he added nostalgically. He didn't seem to have anything else to say on the matter.

Connie was sighing in relief, thinking she had somehow gotten away with it, when Adolphus turned to her again.

"And what is your friend after?"

"After?"

"I can't imagine a slap is all she wants."

Neither can I.

Connie smiled to cover up her inability to answer, but the duke seemed to

misinterpret her silence.

“Go ahead, ask for anything,” he said with a smile. “Shall I give you my head?”

“N-n-n-no!” Connie said, shaking her head vehemently at this frightening suggestion.

“I see. If you should need it in the future, don’t hesitate to ask,” he joked, but his magenta eyes revealed no trace of happiness.

The moment she noticed this, Connie blurted out, “...Do you want to die?”

He stared at her, seemingly caught off guard by her words. Then he smiled bitterly, as if something had fallen into place.

“I think you may be right,” he said. His smile was terribly sad. “I believe I do.”

Connie was momentarily speechless, and she chose her next words deliberately.

“...Um, you see, this friend of mine is very busy, because she wants revenge on so many people. She can’t let herself get caught up with just one of them. So...,” she went on, lowering her eyebrows in consternation. “Don’t you think it would be all right to stop blaming yourself?”

“...That has nothing to do with you.”

“I know. But these aren’t my words.”

She was speaking for someone who, right now, was snorting and looking the other way. But Adolphus was not swayed.

“It doesn’t matter whose words they are. I must bear my punishment.”

The light had gone out of his magenta eyes. They were as dark as a bottomless swamp.

“Otherwise, wouldn’t you pity the child whose life was stolen through no fault of her own?”

“But...”

The duke was surprisingly stubborn. Connie’s words wouldn’t be enough to reach him. If she didn’t do something, she might very well end up leaving with his head in her hands. As she imagined that bloody scene, her eyes teared up.

H-help me!

“I swear! You’re hopeless!”

Scarlett, who had been silently watching the scene unfold, sighed dramatically and planted her hand on her hip.

“I suppose it must be done. Connie!” she said loudly.

“Yes...!” Connie answered, clinging to this lone straw. The next moment, *something* took a running leap into her body.

“As for that...,” the girl said quietly after a brief silence.

Adolphus glanced at her and frowned. How strange. Her voice was brimming with confidence, and her posture was bold. She looked entirely different than she had a moment ago. The timid, restless little animal was gone, replaced by the self-possessed smile of a carnivore waiting to devour its prey.

He felt a powerful wave of déjà vu. Although he had met Constance Grail for the first time today, for some reason, Adolphus felt that he knew her smile very well.

She fixed her gaze on him, that familiar smile still on her lips.

“I’ve never once in my life pitied myself.”

Adolphus gaped at her.

“Yes, I’ve been angry, and I’ve been sad,” she went on. “But I have an awkward, stubborn father, and I can’t do anything about that.”

Who was this girl? No—he knew. She was Constance Grail. She had hazelnut hair, pale green eyes, and an ordinary face. That much was certain. But...

“I don’t feel pitiful. After all, I came into this world wanted and loved.”

There was no way Adolphus could mistake that smile, overflowing as it was with certainty that the person wearing it was the very center of the world.

“If nothing else, I know my father loved me.”

Adolphus gulped.

“I have a lot more I want to say, but yes, I suppose I have only one choice...”

She paused, then whispered her next words like they were a very important secret.

“I’ll tell the rest to Cornelia Faris.”

Adolphus felt dizzy. “I see,” he mumbled, almost too softly to hear. So that’s how it was.

“You know what I mean, don’t you, Father?” she asked.

He did. He did know.

He nodded, somewhere between tears and laughter. The Scarlett Castiel with pale green eyes and hazelnut hair gave a dazzling smile.

“After all, that’s what Mother used to say.”

After she said good-bye to the duke, Connie took a stroll in the gardens around the mansion while she waited for her carriage. Randolph had already left, citing some urgent business.

“I remember this path,” she said. It was among the banks of blazing scarlet salvia where she had met Maximilian’s daughter, little Lettie, not long ago. “You said white hydrangeas used to grow here, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Scarlett nodded.

“The butler, Mr. Claude, told me that these flowers are called scarlet sage in Soldita. He said Duke Castiel chose them himself.”

Connie didn’t know what the duke had been thinking as he talked to Scarlett through her body. But as she left, he had asked her to give his greetings to her friend.

Connie smiled as she gazed at the teardrop-shaped petals fluttering in the wind.

“They’re beautiful.”

Scarlett did not answer. She looked silently out over the carpet of red flowers. Then she snorted.

“Darkian is next. I’ll slap her until those middle-aged wrinkles flatten right out!”

“Hey, wait a second, I’m the one who will have to do that...!”

After his guests had left, Adolphus sat in a daze. Presently, a rich fragrance tickled his nose.

“I thought your throat might be dry, sir,” Claude said. The tea in its porcelain cup was the color of the sunset on the western horizon.

Just like it was that day, Adolphus thought, and looked up. Claude was smiling knowingly. Adolphus smiled back faintly and brought the cup to his lips.

“...Delicious.”

The warm liquid flowed down his throat.

“As your butler, I am honored to see you pleased to the point of tears.”

Adolphus smiled at Claude’s show of nonchalance. As he did, a tear fell into the sunset in his teacup, sending quiet ripples across the little sky.



“I thought your throat might be dry.”

Adolphus looked up at the sound of Claude’s voice. Still lost in the haze of his thoughts, he glanced around the room, unsure where he was. It appeared to be his study. He had no memory of when he had come or how long he had been there. Enough time must have passed for Claude to check on him.

Scarlett’s execution had gone off smoothly. Adolphus had gone to his office in the palace as usual and done his work like he always did. He paid no attention to the public square, instead playing the foolish father ashamed of his daughter’s errors. This was a one-in-a-million opportunity for Adelbide, and it wouldn’t do for the enemy to suspect their plan.

But if he could have, he would have dropped everything to run out to the square.

His daughter was very like her mother, and he was certain she must have held her head up proudly until the very last moment.

She was haughty and grand—but her indomitable spirit was blindingly brilliant.

He was sure that his beautiful, fierce girl had stolen the heart of every person in that square.

Scarlett's remains were inside the urn on his knees. Her body had been left in the streets, battered so badly, he was forced to cremate it.

In that moment, when her life was stolen from her so absurdly, Scarlett Castiel became a villain.

But the truth was, she had committed no crime meriting death. Powerless, foolish Adolphus had not even been able to lay her to rest in the family grave.

He traced the swell of the urn with his finger.

"...I think jet would be best for the casket. It's mined from the oceans in the Far East, and they say it's formed from golden trees that sank to the bottom of the water. Sacred trees that will lead your soul to the promised land, they say."

"I will order some immediately," Claude replied. He sounded the same as always, which allowed Adolphus to continue naturally.

"...Oh, and don't forget to order a blanket woven from the cocoons of moon silkworms. It won't do for her to be cold. Remember how she was always catching colds when she was little? She got fevers so quickly, we couldn't let her out of our sight."

"I do."

"And let's have some beautiful carvings done on the coffin. Hire some carvers from Arrifat. I wonder what design would be best. She wouldn't stand for anything but the finest. She always had to have her way."

"...Yes."

"I'm thinking of bringing her to the freesia fields in our domain. The place where she got covered in mud that time. Maximilian had to drag her home, remember? She looked so beautiful in that blue dress—"

He could say no more. He crouched over the urn, hugging it to his body.

If there had been any other way, he would have sacrificed anything to take it. He would have sold his soul to the devil if that was what it took. He would have given his own life a hundred times over.

“I should have told her I loved her, even once...!”

Instead of being so stupidly proud, he should have told her. He should have kissed her cheeks as many times as she asked him to. It would have been so easy.

With no outlet, his thoughts turned to lamentations. Even if he ended his own life, his sinful soul would never reach the same place as Scarlett’s. Still, he longed to be with her again. If he could speak even one more word to her, that would be enough. He would do anything for that opportunity.

He knew, of course, that his wish could never be fulfilled.

But he was human, and humans can’t help hoping for miracles.

It’s the only way they can go on living.





**Constance
Grail**

Sixteen-year-old who just slapped the duke with enough force to shock a pro wrestler. As she's leaving, notices poor Papa's cheek is more swollen than she realized. Decides never to go anywhere near the Castiel residence again.



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old who can put up with anything. Truly next generation, she's willing to forgive and forget some pretty bad shit in exchange for a single slap. However, she's the type to hold grudges, and she's currently planning regular visits home in order to be spoiled.



**Randolph
Ulster**

Appears scary, but is actually quite practical. Viewed himself as the brakes on the out-of-control odd couple, but is at his wit's end now that they no longer seem to be listening to him. May be developing an ulcer after witnessing his fiancée, a viscount's daughter, attack the duke unprovoked.



**Adolphus
Castiel**

Appears twisted, but is surprisingly upright and honest. Has lived life on hard mode: first wife left him, second wife died, and to top it all off, he suggested his own daughter be executed. Was dangerously close to falling to the dark side, but a slap from a young woman opened his eyes, suggesting an unexpected masochistic streak.



**Aliénore
Castiel**

Appears upright, but has a completely twisted personality. The moment things start going bad, she brings out her secret weapon: "If you've got a complaint, tell it to Cornelia." Extremely loyal to her own desires and hates practicing restraint, making her the polar opposite of her self-sacrificing, kingdom-before-everything husband. The original Scarlett, she punches first and asks questions later.

Claude

The conscience of the House of Castiel, he reads the room better than anyone. Grateful for the miracle, but concerned about poor Maximilian, who didn't get to take part in the moving father-daughter reunion.

“Simon Darkian is in Daeg Gallus?”

On hearing this news from one of his subordinates at the Royal Security Force, Commandant Duran Belsford raised his eyebrows.

“That’s an exciting piece of information—but is there evidence?”

“Not yet. But we may be able to pull some from a separate case.”

Randolph, the subordinate in question, handed Duran the report. Duran flipped through it, his chin resting in his palm.

“Saint Nicholas Hospital, eh? ...Wait a second now, is Crown Princess Cecilia involved in this? That woman is a pain. Every time she’s accused of something, she cries *lèse-majesté*.”

“I have no plans at present to pick on her. The hospital belonged to Calvin Campbell until a few years ago, I hear. It was audited several times back then. None of the audits turned anything up, but...”

Duran looked up from the report and grimaced.

“Don’t tell me the auditor was Simon Darkian.”

“Indeed it was.”

Duran let out an exasperated sigh.

“You’re right. It’s too much to be a coincidence. It’s like they’re asking us to suspect them.”

“Then shouldn’t we fulfill their expectations?”

Duran snorted at the joke—a rare occurrence from Randolph—and returned his focus to the report.

“Unfortunately, that man doesn’t get his own hands dirty. If we’re going to find something, it’ll probably be at the accounting office that handles the books for the hospital. Have you looked into it yet?”

“That would be Edmond Accounting in the Bath district. But several days ago, the company president, Edmond Park, disappeared.”

“You think he figured something out? Or did they shut him up? Either way, you’d better find out where he went, and fast.”

Randolph nodded, bowed, and turned around to leave.

“By the way,” Duran said, “I heard Simon Ulster died.”

Randolph’s hand froze in midair on its way to push open the door.

“I was sure that old man wouldn’t die even if someone killed him,” Duran continued.

“...He had a bad case of consumption for several years before his death,” said Randolph. “They told him he wouldn’t last long.”

“That so?” Duran replied ambiguously, nodding. “You planning a funeral?”

Randolph slowly turned around and shook his head.

“He didn’t like to make a fuss. There will be a small gathering to inter his remains.”

“When?”

“Today.”

Duran raised his eyebrows in surprise. That was sooner than he’d expected. He supposed Randolph’s black military uniform would work for mourning. Apparently, he planned to go straight there after giving some instructions to his staff.

“You’re going alone?”

Randolph frowned, confused by the question. Duran sighed and Randolph scowled, increasingly suspicious. This was a personal loss. Who in the world...?

Who did he intend to suggest Randolph take with him?

“Lieutenant Commander Ulster?”

As Randolph was getting ready to leave, one of his staff approached him.

“A messenger delivered this from your family’s domain.”

The man was holding out a letter bearing the Richelieu seal. It was probably the regular report. Randolph frowned slightly, and the man flinched. After Randolph had thanked him and taken the message, he retreated. Without opening it, Randolph stuffed the letter into his pocket.

A few minutes later, Kyle approached him.

“You’re going out right—oh, it’s your Uncle Simon’s funeral, isn’t it?” he muttered, then cocked his head. “...Wait a minute now.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you’re going alone.”

“...Is there something wrong with that?” he said. His tone was sharper than he had intended, probably owing to his earlier conversation with Duran. Kyle shook his head, a stiff smile on his face.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” he said.

At this point Randolph was just venting. He sighed and told Kyle he’d be back that evening, then left the office.

Outside, a warm breeze was blowing under a leaden sky. Randolph had called a carriage, and after climbing in, he proceeded to open the letter from earlier. It was from his uncle, the current Duke Richelieu. It contained some formulaic condolences for Simon Ulster’s passing and the usual request for Randolph to take over the dukedom.

Just as he’d expected. He stuffed the letter back into his pocket.

Simon Ulster’s funeral was extremely simple and businesslike.

There were hardly any mourners. Still, after they’d left, Randolph found the empty graveyard terribly quiet.

As he knelt before Simon’s gravestone, a portly middle-aged woman approached him.

“It’s been a long time, Junior.”

Although the woman’s face was half hidden by the black lace veil on her brimless hat, he recognized her.

“...Madam Smith?”

Randolph blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected her to show up here. She must have sensed his confusion, because she smiled awkwardly.

“I wanted to thank him, and apologize.”

Although she went by Kimberly Smith these days, Randolph didn't know her real name. She had been a student of his Great-Uncle Simon, but that was long ago. He had met her only a handful of times.

Constance Grail had told him before that the Violet Association attacked her without reason, and his guess was they were probing for information. She'd said Madam Smith had asked her about Jackal's Paradise.

“About that ball,” she said to him. “You people tried to entrap Judge Campbell to save Abigail O'Brian, didn't you? Your sweet little fiancée told me a few things that night, and thanks to her, we were able to catch one of the rats hiding in our garden. However, I must apologize—it seems the nest was deeper than we anticipated.”

Madam Smith lowered her voice, glancing around.

“The rat's name was Edmond Park. He handled the books for the Violet Association's Youth Committee and served as the accountant for Saint Nicholas Hospital, too. We only let our guard down for a moment, but they've already gotten to him. No doubt his body will turn up in a few days. I made sure his associates wouldn't be able to get their hands on his accounting firm for now at least, but it's only a matter of time. If you're going to act, do it fast—before Simon Darkian does.”

Edmond Park—the president of the very accounting firm Randolph had been discussing with Duran just a few hours earlier. Randolph nodded, narrowing his eyes shrewdly. Madam Smith smiled with satisfaction, then peered around in apparent surprise.

“By the way, did you come alone?” she asked.

How many times had he been asked that in a single day? He stared blank-faced at the woman in front of him. Duran, Kyle, now Madam Smith—what in the world were all of them after?

Madam Smith must have guessed his thoughts, because she let out an exasperated sigh.

“You foolish boy. Why do you think Simon left behind someone like me? Why do you think he let you join the Royal Security Force instead of keeping you by his side?”

“I don’t—”

“Times are changing. Before long, musty old traditions like *Ulster* will disappear. You don’t need to take on that responsibility. Take hold of what’s important right now. If you realize this after you’ve let go, it will be too late.”

With that, Madam Smith turned and left.

Randolph stood rooted to the spot, thinking about her unexpected words. He looked at the grave marker. All that lay beneath the words *Simon Ulster* was the man himself. He’d had no wife. But instead of being buried with the rest of the Richelieu family in their domain, he had chosen to be buried here, with the Ulster earls who had preceded him.

Randolph withdrew a tin flask from his breast pocket and placed it next to the gravestone like an offering. He squatted before the grave. The flask held his great-uncle’s favorite brand of spirits.

A drop of water fell onto the white gravestone, leaving a shadowlike mark.

Randolph looked up. Rain was beginning to spill from the low, heavy blanket of clouds. As he watched, the storm gathered force until rain was pelting down on him.

It had been raining on *that day*, too.

Randolph slowly retraced the memory.

That day—the day the carriage his parents were riding in lost traction—it had been raining just like this. The world outside his window had been dim, the whole mansion sunken in sadness. Even though it was spring, he felt the cold in his bones. All he could do was hug his shaking shoulders.

“Listen to me, Randolph.”

His older brother was trying desperately to stay calm, but Randolph could

hear the trembling in his voice.

“I’m here with you.”

That was when he learned for the first time of the House of Ulster.

Shortly after his parents’ funeral, a middle-aged man arrived, calling himself their great-uncle. With his loose black clothing, gray hair, and warped features, Simon Ulster was terrifying—like an evil slave trader straight out of a children’s story.

In a voice that revealed no trace of emotion, Simon announced he had come to take Randolph and explained the duty imposed on the House of Richelieu.

Randolph had accepted his fate quietly, with a frozen heart, but his brother was different.

He grabbed Simon’s legs and flailed his fists against him, shouting again and again that he wouldn’t let him take his little brother. When he realized that his protests were having no effect, he wailed miserably, “How can such an idiotic thing be allowed to go on...?!”

Never before or after did Randolph see his thoughtful, prudent brother fly into such a rage.

“Wait for me, Randolph. I promise you I will bring you back. I am a powerless child now, but I’ll study hard and make connections and become a perfect lord of the domain. No one will be able to say a word against me. Great-Uncle, remember this! As long as I am lord of the House of Richelieu, we will never bring forth another Ulster...!”

But his brother had died abruptly. Randolph heard that even as he lay in his sickbed, he had summoned his tutors, studying to take over the domain until the very end.

Randolph would never return to the House of Richelieu, no matter how much they begged him. He would never become lord of the domain. Doing so would be going against his departed brother’s wishes.

The House of Richelieu had no need for an Ulster.

The rain beat down mercilessly on Randolph. The warmth had drained from

his body, and his military uniform was heavy with water.

In truth, he knew.

Randolph was an awkward man, unable to grasp his brother's true intentions, but he knew that wasn't exactly what the man had wanted.

And that was why the memories would probably keep coming, along with the steady rain falling in his heart.

After Randolph had spent some time staring down at Simon's grave, the rain suddenly stopped.

No—he could still hear it pounding down and see it splashing onto the ground. It just wasn't hitting *him* anymore.

Thinking this was rather suspicious, he turned around and saw a familiar face.

"...Miss Grail?"

She was holding her umbrella out so that it kept the rain off Randolph as he crouched before the grave.

When he looked at her, she frowned.

"...It's raining, so..."

Randolph blinked at her.

"...What are you doing here?" he asked, his mind still fuzzy.

"Um, I heard from Mr. Hughes that today was your great-uncle's funeral."

She shrank back awkwardly. He nodded.

"...Don't you think I'm creepy?" he muttered.

".....What?" she asked, giving him a confused look.

"My parents, my older brother, Lily, my great-uncle—everyone around me dies. It's like I really am some kind of Grim Reaper, isn't it?"

She stared at him as if caught off guard, then suddenly smiled.

"Your fiancée," she began in a nonchalant tone, "was cheated on by her previous fiancé, made a spectacle of herself at a ball, gets pulled into mishaps left and right, and above all, is possessed by a notorious sinner."

Randolph had no idea what to make of this unexpected response.

Constance Grail grinned. “Don’t you think *I’m* creepy?”

Randolph opened his mouth to say something, but then gave up and closed it. She smiled at him like a child who had just pulled off a prank.

“Actually, Kate brought over a lemon pie today. The kind with the meringue baked on top. It’s so crispy, and when you eat it with the sweet-and-sour lemon custard, it melts in your mouth. It’s amazingly delicious. Of course, she doesn’t make it too sweet...”

This fiancée of his had an awfully large appetite for her size. She particularly loved her friend Miss Lorraine’s homemade sweets, and if you left her alone with one of them, she was liable to scarf down the whole thing. He remembered how depressed she would get afterward, when her maid Marta scolded her for eating too much.

He watched her animated expression as she described the pie. Suddenly, his gaze fell on her green eyes. They were like two clear worlds of their own, pulling him in. His heart thudded.

A smile like a pool of sunlight spread over the face of this girl with hazelnut hair and pale green eyes as she reached her hand out toward Randolph.

“Why don’t you come home with me and have some?”



At the end of Diana, the seventh month, there was an incident in the Grail domain.

Davis Richelieu, Randolph Ulster’s uncle and the current Duke Richelieu, paid a visit.

He had, of course, announced this in advance, and the whole domain was in a state of nervous anticipation over the great lord’s arrival. The servants at the Grail family residence were particularly anxious and could be found day and night with their noses buried in the latest books on manners, ordered from the capital.

Percival Ethel, the current Grail viscount, had told them they didn’t need to go

to so much trouble, since the Richelieus would soon be family after all, and everything would be fine. But they dismissed him with frigid stares, pointing out that every time he said things would be fine, they weren't. He simply didn't understand.

Apparently, Davis Richelieu had started out as a clergyman. That was why his older brother, Lewain, had belonged to the church in the Richelieu domain until the deadly accident.

Maybe that was the reason Davis seemed like a fair-minded man, at least as far as Percival Ethel could tell from their written exchanges. He always treated the lower-ranking noble as an equal, and this time was no different. He could very well have settled the matter without going out of his way to visit the Grail domain in person. But he hadn't done that. He must have been the epitome of a serious man. There was just one flaw in his personality...

"Yes, yes, I do have a son. And I know he would like to take over my title. But I truly feel that the Richelieu land ought to go to Randolph. Don't you agree that's only proper? If it doesn't, it would be such a wrong against the memory of poor Owen, who flew off to the land of the gods before he ever had a chance to realize his own ambitions. It would indeed be a crime against the reputation of my revered brother, Lewain."

"Yes, I see."

The man talked too much.

"Don't misinterpret that, now. Lewain was such a compassionate man, I'm sure he would have accepted any decision we made. He looked frightening, but in truth, he was the kindest person you can imagine, and his heart was as pure as an angel's. The truly frightening one was that devil with an angel's face—sorry, I meant my kindhearted sister-in-law, Sarah. I shiver to think of the abuse she is hurling at me from heaven at this very moment."

"I see."

"However, it seems that Randolph has no interest in carrying on the Richelieu line. Lately he hardly ever visits the domain, and he never replies to my letters. I remember how he used to adore me when he was a boy... I imagine this is how fathers of young ladies must feel..."

“I see.”

He had been repeating the same thing for nearly an hour now. The tea that the maid had so carefully prepared for them was completely cold.

“I want that boy to have the Richelieu title.”

Just as Percival Ethel was thinking what a waste it had been to open a fresh box of fancy tea for the occasion, Davis’s tone suddenly grew solemn.

“I do not mean to say that there is some problem with your daughter. And of course a viscount’s daughter can become a duchess. But that is only possible with the understanding and cooperation of everyone involved. It is not an easy road to walk. I would be more than happy to introduce you to a suitable earl or marquess. I most sincerely hope that you will make the right choice.”

Percival Ethel scratched his cheek. As far as he could tell, this was the situation: Davis wanted Randolph to become lord of the domain. But even though he was the son of the previous lord, he had been away for a long time. Percival had heard that both Davis and his son were excellent men, and no doubt their subjects objected to the idea of an unfamiliar master. The best strategy for a peaceful succession was no doubt for Randolph to marry the daughter of a powerful family in the domain—not the daughter of a poor viscount.

The man before him had served as Duke Richelieu for over a decade. If he wanted to, he could certainly get his way by force. Percival Ethel was grateful that he had chosen not to do that.

However, that was as far as his gratitude went.

“Duke Richelieu,” Percival Ethel said as casually as if he were commenting on the weather. “Your proposal is not *sincere* in the least.”

Connie learned about the incident several days after Simon Ulster’s funeral.

“What, you hadn’t heard?” her gossip-loving friend Mylene Reese asked, her eyes wide.

The latest trend in the capital was sparkling water with lots of frozen fruit floating in it. Supposedly it was refreshing for both the palate and the eyes.

Mylene had taken her to try it at a stylish café on Anastasia Street that was popular with young people.

Late Diana was the hottest time of the year. As the two friends sat under the burning sun with their fruit-filled drinks, Mylene was so taken aback, she stopped sipping entirely. Connie shot her friend a resentful glare in return.

She hadn't heard anything of the sort!

"I heard it eventually came to blows, and they ended up in a tearful embrace as the sun set, and they pledged to treat one another like brothers forever after..."

"That's actually a little scary..."

To put it kindly, Connie's father, Percival Ethel, had a generous heart. To put it less kindly, he was careless about details. In fact, carelessness made up about ninety percent of his personality.

He was stubborn despite his lack of forethought, and loose-lipped for a noble, but nevertheless weirdly bold and decisive. In other words, he was completely unreliable. Connie had inherited his ordinary looks, but she was secretly grateful she had been spared his personality. Just as she was thanking the Moirai for this, however, she glimpsed Scarlett nodding fervently and muttering, "So you take after your father! Now I understand." Unbelievable.

Still... Connie sighed.

She knew she and Randolph must seem like a strange match from the outside. That was only natural. Randolph was a high noble. He was tall and manly and good at his job. Sure, he was a little scary, but underneath it all, he was kind and generous. He would never hesitate to help if she was in trouble. As for his unpredictability, she found it endearing.

She, on the other hand, was the daughter of a poor viscount without any backing. She was short and plain and foolish, she came with a ghost, and she was always getting into trouble. She had seen His Excellency turn his poker face up at the ceiling in consternation countless times. They had both agreed to their fake engagement, but still, she could understand how people might see her as baggage.

Even optimistic Connie knew the current situation couldn't go on forever. Their relationship had begun for mutually selfish reasons. Randolph had said as much himself. She knew it must soon come to an end.

But for some reason, as she sat there wondering just how much longer it might last, she felt a tightness in her chest.

"What's wrong?" Mylene asked, clearly puzzled by her friend's unusually despondent expression.

Connie hurriedly pasted a smile on her face. "Nothing. I was just wondering how to teach my father a lesson. Anyway, how is your work?"

Mylene wanted to be a news reporter and had been writing unsolicited articles to submit to all the big publishing companies.

"Very well, thank you!" she answered cheerfully. "Right now, I'm covering the Edmond Park murder."

"Edmond Park?"

"Yes, the president of the accounting firm whose body was found in an alley in Bath the other day. At first, I thought it was just another violent theft, but it strikes me as awfully suspicious. The Security Force is involved, too. If it's a reprisal killing, I'm sure it has to do with his work. He does the books for the Raven Trading Company, Saint Nicholas Hospital, and—"

"Did she say Saint Nicholas Hospital?" Scarlett asked, raising her eyebrows. Connie gasped.

"Wait, Mylene, is Saint Nicholas Hospital the place that Earl Campbell used to run?" she asked in a fluster.

Mylene's eyes widened. "I'm surprised you know that. Don't tell anyone, but I heard Edmond Park and Earl Campbell were gambling buddies."

"Did this Edmond person, by chance, also do the books for a citizens' organization?"

"You mean the Violet Association? How in the world do you know that?"

"A little bird told me."

“I heard they inspected the office but didn’t find anything. Nothing at his house, either.”

Mylene didn’t sound at all sorry about that fact. To the contrary, the excited glint in her eyes reminded Connie of when Mylene had discovered Lady Purick, her avowed “enemy for life,” cheating on her husband.

As Connie gazed at Mylene, the latter stuck out the tip of her tongue and gave in.

“Actually, there’s a certain gambling den Edmond used to frequent. The place advertises itself as a cafeteria. I’m sure there must be some clues there.”

The cafeteria was called The Goat’s Ankle.

“What an odd name...,” Connie said.

“I think it’s gambler’s lingo for dice,” Scarlett explained. “I heard that, in the old days, the ones made from ivory and deer antlers were expensive, so commoners used ones made from sheep or goat bones.”

In other words, experienced gamblers would know right away that the place wasn’t just a cafeteria.

It was located in a neighborhood some distance north of the castle district. Not far away was a bridge over the Nuer River, which cut through the city from north to south, and on the other side was a slum. Maybe that was why people said the neighborhood wasn’t very safe. Even though the sun was still high, Connie could smell alcohol, cigarette smoke, and various rotten things here and there. The main street was lined with the kind of sordid establishments that made her want to hide her eyes.

Even Mylene had said she relied on an informant rather than coming here herself. And yet...

“Here it is,” Scarlett announced boldly, her hand on her hip. Connie covered her face with her hands and slumped her shoulders.

Why was this happening?

“Let’s go in—hey, what’s the matter with you?”

They had split up with Mylene a few hours earlier. It was bad enough that

Scarlett had pressured her into rushing over here, insisting they had to act before the enemy. An informer would be too slow, she'd said. But now, as they stood outside The Goat's Ankle, Connie realized she had a bigger problem. What was she supposed to do when they got inside? If she came right out and asked about Edmond Park, the best she could expect would be for the gamblers to wrap her in a straw mat and toss her into the Nuer.

"Leave it to me!" Scarlett announced proudly. But Connie was worried her attitude, risky enough at a fancy ball, would be like a spark on tinder here, where everyone was itching for a fight. In fact, all Connie could imagine was an imminent explosion.

Just then, someone addressed her from behind.

"...What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Flinching, she turned around to find a small, plain, plump woman standing behind her. Connie figured she must be someone who lived in the neighborhood.

"Oh no, not Kimberly Smith!" Scarlett exclaimed in surprise.

Connie's eyes widened. This woman was Kimberly Smith? She didn't seem to be a vagrant, but her cheeks were sunken, her skin was sooty, she was wearing rags, and most importantly—

"You're not wearing pink...!" Connie couldn't help shouting. The woman's eyes widened slightly.

"Well, well, you're not as dense as I thought," she muttered, sounding surprised.

Scarlett snorted disdainfully. Connie coughed.

"So? What are you doing here? This isn't exactly the kind of place innocent noble girls come for a cup of tea."

"Um, well... I'm just..."

As Connie glanced around nervously, Kimberly Smith sighed.

"Damn it, you're worse than a rabbit who fell in with a pack of wolves. If I leave you alone, you'll only get in the way, so I suppose I have no choice. Come

along.”

With that, she pushed open the door to The Goat’s Ankle as casually as if it were the entrance to her own house.

Even in midafternoon, the place was dark inside. There weren’t many customers, but the ones who were there looked shady. When they noticed that two women had just walked in, they started whistling and ogling them with interest.

Connie shrank back reflexively, but Kimberly strode confidently into the establishment, which wasn’t especially large. A man so tall Connie had to look up to see his face stepped into her path.

“Whad’ll ya have?” he asked coldly, piercing them with his gaze.

“Let me see. Can you recommend something?” Kimberly asked.

“The bone-in meat.”

“I’ll have that,” Kimberly said, stepping toward the proprietor. “Oh my, that’s large. Can you cut it into bite-sized pieces?”

She smiled slightly.

“You know, so the front and back add up to seven.”

The man squinted and looked her over from head to toe. Then he shrugged.

“Oh, that’s what you’re here for. Sorry, the basement’s not open yet.”

“What a pity. I could wait here, but I don’t think I will. After all, I only came to get my friend’s *special reserve*. Ed told me you keep it here for him. See, I have the key.”

She pulled something the size of her pinky from her bosom and flashed it at him. The man scowled, apparently thinking it over, then nodded.

“This way.”

He gestured with his chin for them to step behind the counter. A storage area with a handle was built into the floor of the narrow passage. He lifted the lid. Instead of provisions, it revealed a staircase leading underground. Connie gaped.

The man went in first. Kimberly followed without hesitation, and finally Connie stepped gingerly down after.

In contrast to the ramshackle cafeteria upstairs, a luxurious, stylish room stretched before her eyes. Apparently, the man had not been lying when he said it wasn't open yet, because there was no one else in sight. There were several round tables with cards and dice set out on them. This must have been the gambling house.

Toward the back were several rooms that seemed to be reserved for special guests. The man led them into one of the rooms and told them to wait.

Kimberly took the liberty of selecting a glass from the bottle-lined shelves and pouring an amber liquid into it.

"Did you come here to find out about Edmond Park?" she asked Connie.

"Y-yes."

"Who told you?"

"A f-friend. An aspiring journalist."

"My, you have good connections," she said, looking interested. "You're Randolph Ulster's fiancée, aren't you?"

She took a sip of the shimmering amber liquid.

"I've got a connection to the House of Ulster myself."

"You do?"

"Do you know what the name Ulster means?"

It was simply a subsidiary title held by the Richelieu family, as far as Connie knew. Or was there something more? Maybe her uncertainty showed on her face, because Kimberly set down her glass and whispered in her ear.

"The Ulsters were originally executioners who dispatched foreign enemies of the royal family. Of course, none of that was made public."

Her tone was casual, but her words were not. Connie froze.

"In that sense, I'm an Ulster. There aren't enough of us to call it an organization, but for generations, members of the Richelieu family have served

as its leaders. Oh, but in Lewain's generation—Randolph's father, that is—the Richelieu family didn't put forward an Ulster. At the time, Simon was still in good health, so they didn't need to. Now, as you know, Randolph has carried on the Ulster name. Even in the Richelieu family, only the duke himself and the man who takes the name know about this."

"Exe...cutioners?"

Connie couldn't think straight.

"That's right," Kimberly said, drinking down the rest of her spirits. "In other words, they were secret agents of the royal family. Of course, this all ended several decades ago. These days they have the Royal Security Force, so there's no need to use the Ulsters for such matters. In particular, since King Ernst took the throne, the Ulsters have become a mere shell of what they once were. It's true that's one reason why Faris was able to play off our weakness, and you could say the king and his advisers have taken peace for granted. But look at Randolph. He trained as a secret agent, but now he's in the army. And yet he's still so stuck on the old traditions. It must be the way Simon raised him."

I wonder, thought Connie. What if this was the reason Randolph didn't want to inherit the Richelieu title or get married?

"Why are you telling me this?" Connie asked. If Kimberly knew that much, she probably also knew that Connie's engagement to Randolph was fake.

"Simon Ulster was a hopelessly stubborn man," she said abruptly. "That blasted old fool went and died without the least concern for my feelings. He didn't call for me, not even at the very end. Ultimately, I couldn't overcome that damned Ulster curse. But after his funeral, I had a thought. Maybe I had already given up the fight from the start. After all, I told myself he wasn't interested, and I didn't push it any further."

Kimberly stopped talking and peered into Connie's face with an amused expression.

"But you're not very good at reading the room, are you?"

"Huh?"

"You're bad at lying, and your face is like a window straight into your

thoughts.”

“Huhh?”

“And when left alone, you go and do the most infuriatingly absurd things...”

“Huhhh?”

Was Kimberley insulting her? If so, should she accept the challenge? As she was earnestly trying to decide what to do, the man returned, interrupting their conversation. He was holding what looked like a ledger.

“Ed was killed, wasn’t he? This thing seems dangerous. I didn’t know how to get rid of it.”

He handed the ledger to Kimberly, glanced around, then playfully held up his empty hands.

When they went back upstairs, the cafeteria was a little livelier. Connie wondered if it was just a busier time of day. As before, the customers all seemed to be shady men.

She thought Kimberly would leave right away, but instead she sat down at a table toward the back of the room and ordered two beers.

“Oh, um, I, I don’t drink...!”

“You’re going to burst, you say? Unbelievable...”

“What?!” Connie exclaimed in confusion. Just then, she felt Kimberly hand her something under the table. She started to pull it out to see what it was, but Kimberly sent her a piercing stare.

“Don’t look down. Put it in your purse without taking your eyes off me.”

Connie realized she was holding the ledger. She gasped and looked at Kimberly, who smiled placidly.

“This is all the help I can give you.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a door near the back of the cafeteria. Pretend you’re going to the restroom and just leave. I’ve called someone to pick you up.”

Connie blinked in confusion.

“He’s an employee of mine. He ought to be posing as a merchant at a stall. Find him and ask him what he’s selling. The passwords are *brandy* and *soda water*.”

“But what about you...?”

“I have some business to attend to.”

Kimberly smiled and glanced around the cafeteria. Scarlett narrowed her eyes.

“I did think it was strange that a godforsaken place like this would suddenly get a rush of customers,” Scarlett sneered, narrowing her eyes.

In other words, the new customers were—

“I can handle this alone. I don’t need you here holding me back. If you get my drift, run along to the bathroom! And make sure you’re back before the foam is gone from my beer!”

Connie hesitated.

“I’ll let you choose,” Scarlett jumped in threateningly. “You can either tell those little feet of yours to start walking, or you can let me do it for you!”

Connie slowly stood up. As she stepped away from the table, Kimberly said, “I never expected to see an Ulster at a loss for what to do.”

Connie heard the click of a gun being cocked.

“So look after Junior for me, will you?”

Connie bit her lip, turned away from Kimberly, and started to walk.

As she pushed open the back door and stepped outside, she heard a roar and then a gunshot, perfectly timed with her exit. Her heart skipped a beat.

She was about to walk back inside when she felt the sting of static electricity. It was Scarlett.

“That is not your job right now.”

Words of protest flew to Connie’s lips instinctively, but she swallowed them

back. Scarlett was right.

As she walked forward, she caught sight of a merchant's stall, just as Kimberly had promised. A man was sitting cross-legged on a tarp spread on the ground in a dusty alley. He seemed to be selling spices and dried fruit.

Connie walked up to him.

"Excuse me, what are you selling?" she asked.

"Whatever you need," he answered. His voice sounded young; he was probably in his twenties. He was nimbly peeling an apple with a knife held in one hand. Perhaps it would be his lunch. Connie wasn't sure if he was the backup Kimberly had been talking about.

"...Do you have brandy?" she asked timidly.

The merchant slowly looked up at her. He stopped peeling the apple and asked, "How do you take it?"

"With soda water."

The man silently stood and, leaving his wares where they lay, wrapped his arm around Connie's shoulder.

"Let's go. The carriage is waiting over there."

"Wait, Kimberly is still inside," Connie said.

"If you're here, that means you have the ledger, doesn't it? That is our objective. Or did Madam Smith tell you to rescue her?"

His tone left no room for argument. When he noticed that Connie was staring at him, frozen in shock, he smiled soothingly.

"It's fine, I've already called in support. And she's no amateur herself. She's the only female disciple the legendary Simon Ulster ever accepted."



Long after sunset, Randolph Ulster was sitting in a room at the Security Force headquarters, pressing his finger to his temple and sighing.

"How many times do I have to tell you? Never act on your own!"

He was absolutely right. Connie slumped her shoulders, hunched her back, and apologized.

“I’m s-sorry...”

Instantly, Scarlett devilishly lifted her chin and said, “Oh, but she wasn’t alone. I was with her.” The word *remorse* was clearly nowhere in her vocabulary.

Obviously, that argument was absurd. Connie hurriedly placed her pointer finger over her lips.

“Scarlett, be quiet! You’ll make His Excellency angry!”

“Idiot! He can’t hear me.”

“Oh, right,” Connie said, relieved.

“...You know, I can generally guess what she’s saying,” Randolph interjected coldly. He lowered his eyelids and glared at her. Connie felt the blood drain from her face.

Randolph sighed again. “As for Edmond Park’s ledger, which you so kindly provided, it did contain evidence of illegal activity. This will allow us to have Simon Darkian dismissed from his post. Deborah, too, if things go well. Kyle looked happier than I’ve seen him in years as he prepared the warrant request. I haven’t heard the man hum like that since he broke up that ring of southern slavers a few years back.”

This was no doubt Randolph’s way of thanking Connie. But she wasn’t the one he should be thanking for safely retrieving the ledger. She bit her lip and asked him the question that had been bothering her.

“Um, what about Miss Smith...?”

“She’s safe. She hurt her arm and is being patched up at the public hospital, but I think they’ll let her go home in a few days.”

“Oh, thank goodness!!!”

Connie was so relieved, she thought she might collapse to the floor then and there.

“...What about you? Are you hurt anywhere?” Randolph asked, gazing at her.

Connie blinked at him in confusion, then shook her head.

“I see,” he said, and stood up, his face blank as ever. “There’s a carriage waiting for you downstairs. I’ll walk you to the front door.”

Randolph said he and his colleagues would be up all night preparing to arrest the Darkians. If all went well, the warrant would be issued the following morning, and they would go straight to the couple’s home to lay siege.

“If we drag our feet, who knows what they might do to interfere.”

“Yes, indeed,” Connie said. Thinking back on recent events, she couldn’t help agreeing.

Having run out of things to say, they fell silent. Connie was beginning to feel anxious, but no topic of conversation magically presented itself.

They walked silently through the hallway and down the stairs. Finally, when the spacious entryway came into sight, Randolph spoke.

“By the way, I got a letter from my uncle last night. He said I didn’t have to inherit the title if I didn’t want to. In exchange, he asked that I come see him more often.”

He was probably referring to the incident Mylene had told her about. She could see her father and the duke vividly in her mind’s eye and couldn’t help grimacing.

“I’m so sorry my father caused so much trouble for Duke Richelieu...”

“Sorry?” Randolph asked, sounding puzzled. “I’d say if anyone was being unreasonable, it was my uncle. But he’s finally been freed from the curse of obligation.”

Randolph seemed genuinely pleased for his uncle. For some reason, Connie’s chest tightened.

Then what about you?

But she wasn’t brave enough to voice the question. Noticing her sudden silence, Randolph cocked his head.

“What’s the matter?”

His cerulean eyes were as still as a calm sea.

Connie took a moment to catch her breath before shaking her head.

“Nothing,” she said.

Shortly thereafter, Simon Darkian was imprisoned for the crime of falsifying public documents. But the charges against his wife, Deborah, were dropped owing to insufficient evidence of her involvement. However, during the investigation, her part in other crimes, including smuggling of illegal drugs and human trafficking, came to light, and she was sent for the time being to the Rudolph Convent outside the city.

“Which means Daeg Gallus has lost its biggest backers,” San said with a vicious smile, wrapping her arm impolitely around the back of a luxurious divan in the O’Brian residence’s drawing room. She looked completely at home, like some old family friend.

In addition to San, Connie, Eularia, and the mistress of the house, Abigail, were also present. The group of four had assembled under the guise of a ladies’ tea party.

Abigail took a sip of her tea and tilted her head.

“But what about Cecilia? She’s a crown princess who can make grown men quake in their boots.”

“Of course she’s powerful, too, but not like the Darkians,” San answered. “Her position is too prominent. Plus, her main weapon is popular support. If she slips up and loses that, she’ll have nothing. Her job is background assistance. For instance, she might receive orders from a trader acting as messenger and communicate it to moles like the Darkians. Given her status, no one would think twice about her meeting regularly with the most elite nobles.”

San gave a wry smile.

“I’d bet anything it was Cecilia who helped kidnap Ulysses.”

The day the prince was kidnapped, Cecilia’s favorite trader, Vado, was at the Elbaite Detached Palace.

What's more, he was carrying a wicker basket more than large enough to hide a child.

"I wonder how deep Simon Darkian's involvement was in the kidnapping," Abigail muttered to no one in particular, before turning to the visitors from Faris. "By the way, do you have any news on that front?"

"Nothing much right now," San answered. "Roderick, the second prince, is still shutting himself away like a hermit, and Theophilis, the fourth prince, is already acting like he's king. Apparently, he and his lackeys have decided on a date for the coronation. Allie is locked up in the tower, and if nothing changes, she could be burned at the stake any day now."

Connie guessed that by Allie, she meant the imprisoned third princess, Alexandra. It seemed all the other royal offspring had already officially given up their right to the crown.

"Actually, we heard Roderick was thinking of giving up his rights, too, but his mother, Queen Anna, clearly wanted him to be the next king," Eularia interrupted. "After she died, the old retainers still loyal to her managed to change his mind."

"I'm sure things would have gone differently if Queen Anna were still alive. She was a terrifying woman. Her rank wasn't all that high, but before anyone even realized it, she'd seized control of the inner palace."

She had died of disease several years ago, but San said she had been quite a schemer. For better or worse, her son Roderick was apparently nothing like her.

Then did that mean Theophilis and his aides were the ones pulling the strings?

Abigail, who had been listening silently up till then, broke into the conversation.

"...Nearly a month has passed since Prince Ulysses was kidnapped. I don't want to say this, but shouldn't we consider the possibility he's already dead?"

Everyone fell silent.

The thought had surely crossed all of their minds already.

Suddenly, a scornful voice shattered the heavy silence.

“My, my, you really are a bunch of fools!”

Needless to say, Connie knew only one person that irreverent. She looked up in surprise to find Scarlett peering down at the despondent group from above, near the ceiling. The apparition gracefully crossed her legs midair.

“There’s no way he’s dead. Faris wants a war, don’t they? If they killed the boy, I’m sure they’d parade his body around for everyone to see. The fact that a body hasn’t been found means he is certainly still alive. It’s strange, though. It would be to their advantage if he did die, *so why haven’t they killed him?*”

“What are you saying...?!” Connie exclaimed, springing up, fists clenched, at Scarlett’s cruel words.

“What is it, Holy Grail Girl?”

“Nothing, Scarlett just—”

“What?”

San looked confused. Realizing what she’d done, Connie peered nervously around at the others. Eularia, who was sitting next to San, was staring at her suspiciously. Across from them, Abigail was all but shouting “Oh no!”

Connie coughed and sat back down on the sofa. “Um...I’m sorry, I just thought of something terrible.”

“Something terrible? What is it?”

“Oh, I couldn’t say it out loud.”

“If you thought of something, I want you to tell us. What we need right now is information.”

She could hardly say no to that. She hesitated for a moment, then repeated what Scarlett had said. San’s eyes widened in surprise.

“...You’re right.”

“What?”

“I had assumed Theophilis’s supporters hadn’t acted yet because they have a double of Ulysses in Faris. The boy wasn’t originally supposed to go with the diplomatic mission. I had assumed that nothing would happen until the

diplomats went home. But if you think about their objective, there's no need for them to wait. They want to start a war. They can make up any number of explanations for why Uly is here."

Eularia rested her chin in her hand, lost in thought.

"...San. It was originally Jerome who was supposed to come along as an observer, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Then, at the last minute, Kendall set Jerome up. Uly doesn't have any supporters, and despite how he seems, Kendall takes good care of his people. He's been Uly's tutor practically since the boy was in diapers. He must have been worried about him and thought Adelbide would be safer than Faris."

"That would mean the switch was unexpected for Daeg Gallus. Prince Jerome is small for his age. They could easily have used the same strategy with him as they did with Prince Ulysses. In other words, if they were planning to kidnap Jerome..."

San groaned.

"...If I remember right, Jerome's eyes are—"

"Unfortunately, ordinary blue," Eularia said, finishing her sentence. San grimaced.

"It's not that they don't want to kill him, it's that they can't."

"You're probably right."

"...What do you mean?" Abigail asked, her expression stern.

"Uly's mother is a noble from Soldita," San answered. "It's not a direct line, but she's a descendant of Cornelia Faris. Of all her siblings, she had the most ideal shade of violet eyes. Do you know what is most valued in our kingdom?"

Connie wasn't sure how to answer. San smiled cynically.

"Blood. The blood of the fallen imperial family of Faris. Eye color is said to reflect the purity of that bloodline. They all had the most extraordinary violet eyes. Your royals have magenta eyes, don't they?"

Indeed, purple—or more specifically, magenta—was the color of royalty. Both

King Ernst and Crown Prince Enrique had eyes of that color.

“In that sense, Scarlett Castiel was perfect. Her eyes were neither the violet of Faris nor the magenta of Adelbide. Just like the eyes of Cornelia of the Starry Crown, hers were a perfect amethyst blend of red and blue.”

Scarlett had said her mother was descended from Cornelia Faris. She must have inherited her beautiful eyes from her mother.

“To get back to the point, Uly’s mother’s rank may be low, but the blood of the Faris Empire runs in her veins. The boy may not have the eyes of the Starry Crown like Scarlett, but they’re still an impeccable violet. What if, for that reason, the plotters have decided to install him on the throne? Then it would make sense that they haven’t killed him.”

San clicked her tongue, as if she’d just realized something.

“If Theophilis was the one who planned the kidnapping, he probably would have killed Uly right away. He has no need to put the boy on the throne. After all, he has high noble blood himself. In fact, having a brother with the blood of the Starry Crown, even if he’s not a direct heir, would only cause him problems.”

San looked down, her face full of regret.

“...We’ve been such fools. Not all heirs to the throne want to be king. Sometimes it’s easier to install a puppet and hold the real power yourself. And if you give up your rights to succession from the start, no one will suspect you. I’m sure this is all the plot of that wicked woman. They must have had an easy time of it up till now.”

San frowned.

“We must send a message home right away.”

“Theophilis isn’t our enemy. Roderick is.”

[List of Current Characters]



**Constance
Grail**

Sixteen-year-old who appears to be falling in love. Says a lot of rude things about her dad, has yet to realize she's actually talking about herself. Finds all the stuff about royal eye color way too complicated, probably only understood about half the conversation.



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old who for some reason has been feeling itchy and irritated lately. Concerning a certain unpredictable individual, she finds him so oblivious, she can't help wanting to punch him. Her only takeaway from the conversation about royal eye color was that hers is the best.



**Randolph
Ulster**

His Excellency the Grim Reaper. Always hated rain, but recently has started to think it might not be so bad. Is seriously considering visiting a doctor for the heart palpitations he sometimes feels while looking at his fiancée.



**Kimberly
Smith**

Comes off as a fussy matron dressed all in pink; turns out to be a real 007. No doubt will soon bounce back from her recent injuries. Seems to have complicated feelings toward Simon Ulster.



**Ulysses
Faris**

Wants someone to hurry up and save him already.

**Roderick
Faris**

The second prince of Faris who everyone forgot about. His mother wasn't of especially high birth. Now they say the recluse who supposedly wouldn't hurt a fly has been pulling all the strings. Sounds a little fishy if you ask me.

Theophilis Faris

The fourth prince of Faris who everyone forgot about. His mother was of high birth. Seemed about to checkmate his competitors for the throne; turns out he was just a decoy.

In a dim room, a lean man bent over in quiet laughter.

“It won’t be long now.”

The room was in one of the villas at Faris’s royal palace. The villa had been given to his mother, a favorite wife of the king’s, and after her death had become the residence of her son, Prince Roderick. Rumors had spread that the struggle for power had drained the prince of his mental and physical capacity, and no one came to see him anymore.

No one except *them*.

“That fool Theophilis doesn’t seem to realize he’s being deceived, and pesky Alexandra will be burned alive before she sees the sun again. I hear that Ulysses is growing weak. Let’s beat a healthy sense of fear into the boy so he doesn’t resist when we bring him back to Faris. Just don’t give him scars anyone will see. He is our darling future king, after all.”

Roderick curled up his lips and tilted the glass of blood-red liquid in his hand.

“Speaking of which, I read the report from Adelbide. A low-ranking noble girl has been sniffing around, has she?”

“We have taken appropriate measures.”

The man who answered was in the prime of life. He had insinuated himself with Theophilis, earning a reputation as an outstanding aide. However, he had a tattoo of the sun behind his left ear—he was a liaison with Daeg Gallus.

The truth was, Roderick didn’t know much about that frightening organization. His mother was the one who had arranged the contract with them. The enormous fee was to be paid after Adelbide had safely become a territory of Faris.

Everything he had now, he had received from his mother, Anna. She had been of low rank, but she had used her beautiful face and body to protect Roderick. The hawkish chancellor was among her gifts. He pretended to support

Theophilis, but in truth he was Roderick's man. He had been one of his mother's lovers.

"Very well. I'm sure you chose someone skilled for the job."

The man gave a slow nod.

"Only the best. He is a man who can pick and choose between a hundred faces."



Why was this happening?

The girl stared up at her ceiling.

Today, a new doctor was supposed to come. Her maid, Marissa, had said he was a famous doctor skilled in treating illnesses of the mind. She wondered how much money her father had spent this time. Was it because he feared a scandal or because he doted on his youngest child? She supposed it didn't matter.

How stupid, she thought with a twisted smile.

The maid showed the doctor, or whoever he was, into the room. He was a hunchbacked old man. The girl glanced at him without getting up from her bed.

He said his name was James.

He told the other maids in the room to step back. He said if they didn't, he wouldn't be able to gain the girl's confidence. Maybe because he looked like a weak old man, they obeyed his order meekly. Of course, they stayed in the room, where they could rush to her aid if need be, but moved far enough away so they couldn't hear the conversation.

"What a relief," Dr. James said with an amiable smile. "Your mind is just fine. It is simply locked tight for safekeeping. Isn't that so?"

She said nothing, just as she had said nothing to the many doctors who had come before. If she sat there long enough, looking like a hollow doll, they all eventually gave up and left.

But this old man was different.

"Wouldn't you like to get revenge?"

Suddenly the doctor's tone changed. Instead of a hoarse old man, he sounded young.

She turned her eyes slowly toward him. He nodded knowingly.

"Yes, revenge. Revenge on the girl who made you like this—Constance Grail."

Constance Grail.

The instant she heard that name, her entire body grew hot, as if the blood in her veins were boiling.

Before she knew it, she'd sat up and was staring at the old man like she wanted to leap at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Calm down. I'm on your side, *Pamela Francis*."

The man smiled. She noticed that he had a very unusual feature—two black dots in his eye.

Roderick Faris

The second prince of Faris, a minor character until a few pages ago, now suddenly acting like the final boss. Apparently trying to look the part, he made his entrance laughing suggestively and holding a wineglass, but he wasn't really saying anything important.

Anna Faris

Roderick's deceased mother. Concerned about her unemployed son, leaves him a violent extremist group in place of home security. Monster parent and big complainer when alive.

James

Elderly doctor who visits the Francis residence. Has two black dots in his eye.



Pamela Francis

Baron's daughter recuperating in her domain after a traumatic experience in the capital.

Dear Allie,

How are you? The rumors say your new residence wears an iron dress so impregnable not even an ant can get in. Reminds me of our old enemy, Ms. Sullivan. I hope you'll tell me all about it soon—oops, Ria just punched me. That's why my writing looks all messed up. Pay no attention to that, okay?

As for us, I'd like to say we're doing very well, but unfortunately, we still haven't found our cute little brother. At this rate, Kendall's head will look like a logging site.

Knowing what a worrier you are, I bet you're more anxious about us than about yourself these days. But I don't want you to worry. The wind is blowing from the east. Things are going to be fine, I'm sure of it. Since time immemorial, captured princesses have always been rescued at the last minute. And you know how lucky I am, don't you, Allie?

Please just hold on a little longer. We are coming for you no matter what. I'm so sorry you've had to bear the brunt of this. I'll happily accept up to two slaps across the face as penance.

Love,

San and Ria

The tower was shaped like a gently sloping cone with nothing inside, the only light coming from a round skylight at the top that glinted white in the sun when she looked up. But the walls were smooth, and there was no staircase. Only that empty shaft so tall, it seemed it would reach the clouds.

But that was to be expected. Since ancient times, this had served as a prison for royalty, as well as their place of execution.

Though they said she was merely awaiting her death, they still gave her three solid meals a day. She got her food trays through a slot no higher than a cat's head. Someone must have bribed the person who brought them, because lately, letters had been arriving regularly underneath the wooden plates.

And that day, a letter she had been waiting and hoping for arrived from abroad. When "Allie" read the words of encouragement, so like their author,

she smiled for the first time in a very long time.



The day after the ladies' tea party concluded Roderick was behind the whole scheme, Connie heard that Simon Darkian had killed himself in prison.

A few days later, she visited Abigail's house again, this time with Randolph. She was taken to a leafy courtyard, where tea had been set out on a parasol-shaded table. There, she chatted happily for a while as she drooled over the famous O'Brian pastries. But this peaceful interlude was cut short when Randolph took advantage of a lull in conversation to announce that Deborah Darkian had escaped.

"Deborah...escaped?" Abigail echoed with a frown.

"Yes. It seems she slipped away when they were transporting her to the convent. The entire capital has been cordoned off since last night, but they still haven't found her."

"I see..."

Abigail sank into thought, looking grim. Even Connie, who had heard the news earlier from Randolph, grew anxious and darted her eyes around the garden.

Suddenly, she heard children laughing behind them. She turned around to see two little girls romping in the shade of an evergreen tree a few paces away.

Leticia Castiel was laughing happily, her hand over her mouth. The precocious Lucia was smiling mischievously as she whispered something into Lettie's ear. What in the world could she be saying?

Although today's visit happened to coincide with Deborah's escape, the original aim had been to introduce Leticia to the O'Brian family. This was a request from Randolph's friend Maximilian. It seemed little Lettie Castiel was quite shy around strangers, and her father wanted her to make a close friend before her eventual debut in society. Abby's adopted daughter Lucia was close in age and status to Lettie. Fortunately, their personalities seemed to be a good match as well, because they had warmed up to each other right away and were now running around the garden together laughing hilariously.

“...It’s a pity. Debbie didn’t used to be like that.”

Connie looked up at the muttered comment. Abigail was smiling sadly.

“We were friends when we were little girls, you know. Deborah was quite a bit older, but in those days, she was very shy, and she always used to hide behind me. You’d never guess, would you? I’m not sure exactly when we grew apart,” she said, gazing at Lettie and Lucia as they squealed happily.

Then, in a bright tone, as if trying to shake off her gloom, she asked, “And how goes the search for Prince Ulysses?”

“Simon didn’t seem to know anything about it,” Randolph answered. “No clues were found at their residence, either.”

The group heaved a collective sigh at the lack of progress. Scarlett, who had been listening quietly, finally spoke up.

“That trader who used to visit Elbaite Palace all the time kidnapped Ulysses, didn’t he? What does he look like?”

Connie relayed the question to Randolph, since only she could hear Scarlett. He nodded.

“He’s a young man from the Republic of Soldita. I hear he always wore a hood over his head. I don’t know what his face looks like, but he has dark skin, and they say he probably belongs to one of the minority tribes that were absorbed into the Republic.”

“Dark skin, you say?” Scarlett echoed. “Then he must have stood out here in Adelbide. Even if he was using dye to disguise himself, he must have kept it on the whole time he was posing as a trader—after all, he could have been questioned by anyone. He probably drew attention at his hideout, too. No one reported seeing him?”

Connie repeated Scarlett’s words, and Randolph shook his head.

“That means he must be somewhere no one would find him suspicious. Like a port that constantly has ships coming and going from the Republic. Shouldn’t we be looking into people who own land in such places? Especially those with a connection to Daeg Gallus. Oh, come to think of it, there is one,” Scarlett said

with a satisfied smile. “Care to guess? It’s someone you rescued at the old Montrose residence.”

Noticing Connie’s confused expression, Scarlett glared down at her in exasperation. Desperately, Connie racked her brain for the answer.

The old Montrose residence was where the Earl John Doe Ball took place. Connie remembered a woman who collapsed in the middle of the raid. Scarlett had called her Jane. But that wasn’t her name—it was the nickname for the hallucinogen everyone was using.

“That woman’s family owns land by the sea, if I remember correctly,” Scarlett continued. “Randolph said they were involved in smuggling Jackal’s Paradise, I’m sure of it. And I’ll bet that port gets a lot of boats from Soldita. Her name was—”

“Kiara Grafton...,” Connie mumbled, the memory suddenly coming back to her.

Randolph had told her in the carriage on the way to the Castiel residence the time Maximilian invited them. It was the day she first met Leticia.

Randolph nodded as if he understood what she was talking about.

“Ah, Kiara. She’s currently in her domain getting treatment for addiction. Her father, too. The Grafton domain isn’t too far from the capital. I believe they own several warehouses on the wharves. It’s quite possible Prince Ulysses is being held there. We’d better look into it immediately.”

As he stood up, Connie reflexively cried out, “I’m going with you...!”

“No. It’s too dangerous,” His Excellency replied curtly, fixing her with an imposing stare. She flinched but held her ground.

“I know I’m useless, but Scarlett will be with me. She might be able to help you, like she did just now. And if everything works out, she could even peek into the warehouses—”

“Exactly!” Scarlett broke in. “There’s no solid evidence yet, so he can’t get a warrant, and if he brings along his team, all the commotion will probably tip off the troublemakers. But I’m invisible, and brilliant, too. Just as Connie said, I’ve

got the strength and skill of a hundred men, to put it mildly!”

“I didn’t say that,” Connie replied with a straight face.

After a pause, Randolph said stiffly, “...We’ll need someone to take Leticia back to the Castiel residence.”

Abigail, who had been observing their exchange in silence, raised her hand.

“I’ll have one of my servants take her back. Will that do? Let’s allow them to play a little longer, though. It’s not even noon yet, and they’re having so much fun.”

Out of plausible excuses, Randolph Ulster sighed in quiet resignation.

The carriage ride from the capital to the wharves in the Grafton domain would take half a day. They stopped at the Security Force headquarters to check the address of the marquess’s warehouses, then immediately boarded a long-distance carriage.

The roads became rougher the farther they got from the capital, and the carriage began to rise and fall rhythmically, as if it were being tossed on the waves.

Randolph was taciturn. Although his expression remained blank, he gave off a frightening aura.

“...Are you a-angry?” Connie asked without really meaning to.

“No,” he replied, though his tone was fairly curt. Noticing that Connie had stiffened, he tried to lighten up the mood. “I’m really not. I’m just trying to convince myself I’m better off keeping you in my sight than having you off doing who knows what.”

“Oof...”

It might’ve been better if he were simply angry, Connie thought, hanging her head.

They were both silent for a few moments, before she finally said, “By the way, the paperwork for the public announcement of our engagement arrived from the church.”

“...Did it?”

Randolph hesitated over his words for a moment. Then he continued flatly, “I should have told you sooner, but my uncle has officially announced he intends to pass on the Richelieu title to his son. It looks like I’ve escaped that troublesome role after all. So...”

I don’t want to hear any more, Connie thought, despite herself.

She knew what he was going to say.

“So we ought to make arrangements to dissolve the engagement once the kidnapping is solved. Of course, we’ll do it in a way that lays no fault on you.”

Her heart hurt. It was pounding in her ears. She felt as if she had been abandoned alone on an unfamiliar road. Loneliness and unease washed over her.

When he saw Connie’s lost expression, Randolph showed an emotion for once, knitting his brows in concern.

“...I’m sure the right fellow will appear very soon,” he said slowly, as if he were explaining something to a child. “The kind of man who would never hurt or kill anyone.”

Connie shook her head without looking up.

“...What are you going to do, Your Excellency?”

“Return to my old life.”

“You won’t...marry?”

She looked up and saw a flash of conflict in his cerulean eyes. After a moment of hesitation, he said, “...No. I am not confident I can make someone else happy.”

Scarlett rolled her eyes.

“What an idiotic man,” she muttered.

By the time they reached the Grafton domain, the sun was beginning to sink. In case a lookout had been posted, they stopped the carriage a block before the wharf and disembarked. The sky was beginning to turn deep red in the west,

but on the docks, workers were still unloading cargo from ships and inspecting the contents.

After walking a short distance, the activity around them faded, and presently, they came to several rows of gable-roofed brick buildings.

Peering around warily, Randolph and Connie read off the address numbers engraved in each building.

“It’s the third one from the left in this row,” Randolph whispered, looking down at the map in his hand. “I don’t see any guards. Think our guess was wrong?”

“It is strange,” Scarlett said. “There’s a lattice window on the second floor. I’ll go have a look inside.”

Connie watched as she floated up and peered into the window.

“...What?” Connie heard her blurt out. She sounded upset. The next moment, Scarlett whipped her head around, squinting her amethyst eyes into the distance. For a moment, she seemed to be searching for something. Then she gave a soft gasp.

“Scarlett?”

At almost the same moment as Connie tilted her head in question, something flew through the air and landed near her feet, rolling across the ground. It was an oval piece of cast iron the size of her palm.

“Run!” Scarlett screamed.

“Run?!” Connie echoed.

At that, Randolph pulled Connie protectively into his arms, leaped into the shadows, and pulled her facedown onto the ground.

An instant later, an explosion thundered in her ears as a blinding flash of light consumed her world.



Lucia O’Brian was practically floating on air. For the first time in her life, she had made a friend her own age. She had hair the color of black tea with lots of

milk, pale magenta eyes, and a face like an angel. At first, she had acted as wary as a stray kitten, but very soon they were as close as sisters.

Lucia had never dreamed she would experience such happiness. Until a few years earlier, simply staying alive had taken all her energy.

It was Abigail who had rescued her from that hellish place. She and kind Teddy, who looked like a bear, and Rudy, who had a bad mouth but always looked after her. The three of them were Lucia's irreplaceable treasures.

From now on, Abby had told her with a smile, your stock of treasures will only grow.

Lucia grinned. She was so excited.

Outside the carriage window, Anastasia Street was lively as always. On the way to take Leticia back home, they had decided to make a stop and buy some of the cookies that everyone was talking about in the castle district. She'd heard they looked like shells small enough to eat in one bite. Supposedly, the crispy pastry had loads of custard filling inside. She knew Abby would enjoy them. Plus, she'd been so busy lately.

The maid went into the shop first to look around, then came back to inform them that there was a line and that she would go back in and wait. In the meantime, the two girls would stay in the carriage and chat.

Not a moment later, Leticia was looking curiously out the window when she exclaimed, "Oh no, that cat's hurt!" and jumped out of the carriage.

Sure enough, the cat she was running toward was bleeding from its hind leg. It must have been agitated because of its wound, as its fur stood on end threateningly while it raced off into an alley. Leticia ran after it. The blood drained from Lucia's face. Although they were in the busy castle district, you never knew where danger might be lurking once you left the main thoroughfare.

She jumped out of the carriage in a panic, but Leticia was nowhere to be seen. Although the sun was still high, the alley was deserted and dusky. Her heart was beating so hard, it hurt.

She heard a cat meow behind her.

At the same time, a hoarse voice called her name. She turned around.

Then she froze.

“...Lady Deborah?”

Leticia was standing there—with Deborah Darkian.

The cat meowed again. Leticia was holding it in her arms. But her face was white as a sheet, and she looked on the verge of tears.

“...Oh!”

Suddenly, the cat writhed temperamentally, showing no sign of injury, and leaped from Leticia’s arms onto the ground. Leticia let out a gasp but did not chase it. She couldn’t.

Deborah was holding a knife to the trembling girl’s neck. Her lips formed a sweet smile.

Lucia gulped. She had met Deborah only once before. Abby had taken her to the theater, and by chance, they had run into her. Although it had lasted only a moment, Lucia could not easily forget the way her ashen eyes had burned with loathing.

That was why she understood right away what Deborah was trying to do.

I’m glad, she thought. I’m so glad Deborah Darkian is the one standing in front of me.

After all, it wasn’t Leticia she wanted to hurt.

Lucia let out a soft sigh of relief.

“Lady Deborah, please let that girl go. The person you want is me—Lucia, isn’t it?”

Leticia’s eyes widened. She shook her head frantically. Lucia found herself distracted, worrying the movement might cause the knife to pierce Leticia’s skin.

“I don’t think it’s realistic for you to try and take both of us,” she continued. “And I’m sure you’d have a very hard time killing someone with those skinny arms of yours. There would be lots of blood, and it would get all over your

dress, and you wouldn't be able to use your knife anymore."

She walked slowly toward Deborah with both hands held in the air. Deborah let go of Leticia. She'd probably only intended to threaten her from the start. Leticia crumpled to the ground.

Lucia quickly looked her over to make sure she wasn't hurt, then smiled.

"Tell Abby I'm sorry, won't you, Lettie?"

Every day of Lucia's life since she was rescued from that hell had been happy. Really, truly happy.

She had no regrets at all. To the contrary, she felt glad she could protect the first friend she had ever made.

At her words, Leticia—who had been struggling to catch her breath with hands planted on the ground—jerked up her head.

"No!"

Lucia's eyes went wide. She hadn't expected this kind of resistance.

"Never...! Whatever happens, we're going home together...!"

Leticia had been shaking a moment earlier, but now her pale eyes glittered with unmistakable anger.

"You witch! You think you'll get away with this?!" Leticia shouted, latching her arms on to Deborah before Lucia could stop her. Deborah flinched but quickly fixed her cold glare on Leticia.

"Shut your mouth, child," she spat out. Then, with the hand not holding the knife, she whacked the back of the struggling girl's neck. She must have hit her mark, because Leticia sank back to the ground and did not move again.

"Lettie!" Lucia screamed, running to her side. Her face was pale, but her heart was still beating. She seemed to have fainted. As Lucia breathed a sigh of relief, Deborah clamped her hand around the girl's arm.

Lucia looked up. The woman's cloudy gray eyes reflected her image.

"I wonder what face that hypocrite will make when I send her your head!"



It seemed Randolph Ulster and his fiancée had left for the wharves in the Grafton domain.

When Royal Security Force Lieutenant Jeorg Gaina informed Rufus May of the news in his office at Moldavite Palace, the vice-comptroller-general's lips curled up in a placid, unreadable smile.

"They've certainly got sharp eyes," he said after a pause, in a voice so frighteningly quiet it made cold sweat run down Gaina's cheek. He tried to explain.

"B-but it was a good thing I stationed a guard in the document room, like you said."

Gaina, who was forever being ridiculed as a "spoiled noble boy," had never gotten along with Randolph, who despite being a noble as well, went about his work shrewdly. All he'd had to do this time was tell his subordinates that their perennial rivals in the Ulster Unit were sniffing around the Earl John Doe Ball incident, and they'd obeyed his orders without question.

That had allowed him to get the jump on Randolph.

To start with, the whole point of the Earl John Doe ball that night had been to kill Kiara Grafton. Grafton's lover had convinced her to join the organization, but her drug abuse had caused her to become mentally unstable, so they'd decided to shut her up before she could make a mistake. With Deborah Darkian's help, they had covered up the attack with a raid. For some reason, however, Constance Grail had been in attendance, and she had rescued Kiara, ruining the plan.

At the very least, Gaina had managed to prevent Kiara from being interrogated, but somehow they'd still figured out she was a member of Daeg Gallus. At one point, he'd thought he was getting an ulcer as Kyle Hughes slowly homed in on his blunders.

Just thinking about the behavior of that handsome-faced scoundrel made him grip his stomach.

"And what's happening now?" May asked, his tone icy. Gaina hurriedly straightened his back.

“It’s all going according to your plan. We’ve already sent a fast horse to the warehouse where they’re hiding, and Salvador and the others are on the move.”

Gaina didn’t know how the man acted within the organization, but the Rufus May he knew was extremely shrewd. His schemes were always perfect, right down to his detailed contingency plans for when something went wrong. In the present case, they were supposed to divide into two groups after removing Prince Ulysses from the hiding spot. One would take the boy to a new location while the other handled Randolph and his fiancée.

“Did you send a messenger to Pamela Francis?”

Gaina’s eyebrow twitched.

It was only a few days ago that he’d received a strange message from a liaison for the organization. Apparently, the notorious nobleman’s daughter who was supposed to be recuperating in her family’s domain was back in the capital. He’d been ordered to inform Pamela if that thorn in their side, Constance Grail, somehow figured out Prince Ulysses’s location and made a move.

“Yes. I did as I was ordered. By now she should be heading to the Grafton domain. But...,” Gaina said with a confused frown, “...is there any point? Neither of them is likely to come back alive.”

It was true that Randolph was a highly skilled man. He had learned from Simon, who was reputed to be one of the top Ulsters in history.

But he had no support, and Gaina doubted he’d be able to get out of this particular fix with his untrained fiancée weighing him down.

A faint smile formed on Rufus May’s handsome face.

“You’re probably right, but nothing is certain. Pamela Francis is our insurance—just in case.”



The flash of light lasted only an instant. It seemed they had escaped a direct strike. And thanks to Randolph pulling them behind some scrap wood in the nick of time, they were not injured. Still, Connie’s vision was blurry, and her ears

rang and echoed as if a membrane had been stretched over them.

“We’re a-alive...”

The relief lasted only an instant, however, as a rally of gunshots flew over their heads. Connie froze.

“Where’s it coming from?”

Sheltering her in his arms, Randolph scanned their surroundings with narrowed eyes.

“I saw someone on top of the warehouses a moment ago!” Scarlett answered without pause. “They’re in the third row toward the back left!”

“She says th-third row toward the back left! On the roof...!” Connie shouted. She looked in that direction and caught a glimpse of reflected light.

“Ah, over there?” Randolph said. He looked up and instantly fired the gun in his hand twice. The recoil reverberated through Connie’s body. The sniper tumbled from the roof and hit the ground with a heavy thud, then lay motionless.

“They must’ve been waiting for us. I should’ve been more careful,” Randolph muttered in frustration. For once, Scarlett shook her head.

“The warehouse was already empty. It looked like they left in a hurry. They knew you were coming. Instead of blaming yourself, maybe you should try asking who gave you away.”

Before Connie could relay her words, another gunshot rang out.

“...There’s more of them,” Randolph said, clicking his tongue in irritation. To Connie’s surprise, he released her and pushed her into a blind spot. Gesturing for her to stay still, he leaned partway out of the shadows and returned fire. The gunshots paused briefly, as if the enemy was observing them. Connie cautiously let out the breath she had been holding. But nothing had changed. They were still in danger, and it seemed they had more than one opponent. One misstep would see them filled with holes. She had no idea what to do. She cursed herself for being such a burden.

“I’ll draw the enemy’s attention. You escape,” Randolph said.

“What...?”

“Scarlett, please take care of Miss Grail.”

Randolph pushed up the barrel of his gun and discarded the empty shells before swiftly loading fresh bullets.

“What was that?” Scarlett said, her well-shaped eyebrows shooting up. Of course, Randolph neither saw nor heard her.

And because of that, he didn’t have to answer her.

Without a backward glance, Randolph leaped out of the shadows. An instant later, a hailstorm of bullets rained down on him. Connie gasped. He nimbly dodged them, weaving between warehouses and piles of old wood and shooting back exactly where his opponent was standing.

“Your Excellency!”

But it was impossible for him to dodge every attack. A bullet grazed his arm, sending up a fountain of blood.

Without knowing what she was doing, Connie leaped up. She tried to run to his side—but Scarlett stepped in front of her in a panic and held her back. She felt the shock of static electricity.

“Think for a second! What can you do by going to him? You’ll only become a second target!”

“But His Excellency...!”

The gunshots were relentless. Randolph seemed to be hiding in the shadows for the moment, but how long could he last?

“Scarlett, what do I do...?!” she wailed, looking up with tear-filled eyes. Scarlett flinched back and hesitated for a moment, then sighed. She was at her wit’s end.

“I suppose I have no choice!” she yelled, before floating through the air to Randolph.



By the time she noticed, the sun had sunk below the horizon. The moon that a

moment ago had been illuminating Lucia's surroundings must have slipped behind a cloud, because only a faint glow remained.

No doubt wanting to escape the crowds downtown, Deborah had taken her to a small house on the outskirts of the city. Perhaps to avoid making a bloody mess, she stopped short of going inside. Instead, she set Lucia down in the garden before taking out her knife. The area was surrounded by woods, meaning no one would hear her if she screamed.

"If you're going to blame anyone, blame Abigail," Deborah whispered into her ear. Lucia could sense the strength behind the blade as it pressed into her neck. She felt it break through her skin. She shut her eyes, steeling herself for what was to come.

"Enough!"

An oddly cheerful voice ripped through the silence.

"Granny, you've become a real pain lately," the voice went on jokingly.

The speaker was a lanky young man. He was holding a large burlap bag in one hand. Lucia blinked at him in surprise.

"Salvador?"

Deborah sounded upset by this unexpected intruder.

"Why are you here?"

"I should be asking you the same thing. I wish you wouldn't use my relay spot without asking. But seriously, did you even think before coming here? Hmm? How many people saw you? I won't be able to use this house anymore. I just came here to bring some *cargo*, and now I've got more work to do. Man, what a pain. Of course, it's me that Krishna's going to chew out."

"I'll leave as soon as I'm done. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't interfere," she spat out.

The man tilted his head lazily.

"Ordinarily, I'd go along with that. I couldn't care less if you escape or die like a dog. But..."

He paused to give a flippant laugh.

“...I don’t believe in killing kids.”

Lucia looked up in surprise at the man named Salvador.

“So just run along to the convent like a good girl. And why don’t you distract those pesky military police while you’re at it. Although you might end up wishing you’d died here,” he said casually, grabbing Deborah’s wrist and twisting it upward until the knife dropped to the ground with a clatter. Now that the deadly weapon was gone, Lucia distanced herself from Deborah.

“You...!”

Infuriated by Lucia’s escape, she raised her free hand as if to strike Salvador’s face.

But suddenly, she screamed and sank to the ground. Confused, Lucia looked at her—and her eyes went wide.

The knife was sticking straight out of Deborah’s thigh.

“You don’t really need your arms or legs. As long as your heart is beating.”

Salvador laughed again and roughly pulled the knife back out. She let out a shrill scream. The pool of blood grew, along with the nauseating smell of rusted iron.

“Of course, we’ll have a problem if you wag that tongue of yours during the interrogation. I’d really like to pull it out right now, but the kid’s watching...”

Deborah went white and shook her head over and over again like a broken doll. Salvador narrowed his eyes and delivered an icy command.

“Make sure she can’t talk by the time she gets to the convent.”

Lucia didn’t know when the pair of men had appeared, but they stepped forward and dragged Deborah away.

Lucia shivered at the thought of what might happen to Deborah. Noticing her pale, frightened face, Salvador laughed carelessly.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll take you home. You’re still a kid, after all.”

She wasn’t sure if she should feel relieved. As she was trying to decide what

to do, she heard a muffled voice.

“Save me.”

It was a child—a boy. She glanced around but saw no one. The man looked at her suspiciously. It seemed he hadn’t heard anything. She wondered for a second if it had been a ghost, but the voice had been so frightened and real. She could almost hear the boy breathing.

He must be alive. She didn’t know why, but she felt sure of it.

The question was, where was he hiding? He couldn’t be far away. She looked around. He could be in the woods, or—

Just then, Lucia remembered that Salvador had been carrying a large burlap bag. A child could easily have fit in that bag.

He must be in there.

Salvador’s face suddenly tensed. He gave her a curious look, then followed her gaze. When he realized she was looking at the bag in his hand, he smiled wryly.

“You’ve got a good nose.”

Lucia’s heart pounded.

“But now I can’t let you go home. What should I do?”

His reddish-gold eyes, the color of the setting sun, darted around pensively.



The storm of gunshots fell silent.

Randolph, who was surveying his surroundings from behind a pile of junk, took advantage of the lull to tear off a strip of his shirt and tie it tightly around his shoulder. The bullet hadn’t struck near an artery, so the wound wasn’t as bad as it looked.

Still, they were unquestionably at a disadvantage.

...Not good.

That was his conclusion after counting his remaining bullets. He’d taken down

a number of opponents, but he didn't know how many were left.

As he caught his breath, his shoulders heaving, he thought about what to do. The problem was, instead of strategies for defeating his opponent, all he could think about was whether or not Constance Grail had escaped safely.

For such a timid person, she was principled about the strangest things, unexpectedly stubborn, and so good-hearted that the second he took his eyes off her, she always got herself wrapped up in some new mess.

Her expression was constantly changing, but her honest green eyes always stayed the same. Before he knew it, she had brought color to his gray world.

Maybe that was why he'd done it. He knew from the start he had no chance of winning. But he had decided to fight anyway because he wanted to stall the enemy, even for a minute. She brought endless complications into his life, but if only she could make it out safe and sound—

—*Now*.

He made his decision with the utmost calm.

At that very moment, a man rolled across the ground with a low wail, clutching his wrist as his gun skidded over the ground, throwing off blue sparks. This wasn't a misfire. It was as if a small bolt of lightning had hit his weapon.

The gunfire started up again all at once. Countless bullets flew like arrows toward Randolph.

"...Scarlett?" he mumbled in a daze. A gust of wind blew past him as if in answer.

As if leading a charge, the wind turned back the rain of bullets. Randolph could sense the enemy flinching back in the face of the invisible force.

His lips curled up in a wry smile. He'd asked Scarlett to protect Constance. This must've been her way of saying she didn't take orders from anyone. Still—

"Thank you."

A path opened up before him. He raised the gun in his hand once more and followed in Scarlett's wake.

Night had fallen. The moon was covered by clouds, and the world was swathed in a deep navy. From a distance, it was impossible to know what was happening. All Connie could hear was the chilling sound of bullets cutting through the air. She watched and waited, praying. Suddenly, everything went silent. It seemed to be over. Her heart pounded.

Was Randolph safe? Was Scarlett?

“What a ridiculous face you’re making.”

The exasperated voice came from directly overhead. Connie sniffed.

“Scarlett! You’re s-s-safe!”

“Obviously. Who do you think I am? And by the way, Randolph Ulster is alive, too. Which is only natural, since I lent him a hand.”

Connie hastily looked over her shoulder. If she squinted, she could make out a silhouette slowly approaching. It was indeed Randolph. He seemed to be walking steadily, but he was pressing a hand to his slumped left shoulder.

When she realized who it was, she leapt to her feet and rushed toward him.

“Your Excellency! You’re wounded!”

Panting, she threw herself at his large form. He looked down at her with a vacant expression.

“Your Excellency?”

“...You didn’t escape?”

She blinked.

“I thought I told you to escape.”

It sounded vaguely like an accusation. She blinked again, slowly—then suddenly narrowed her green eyes.

“.....You!”

Her voice was low, like she’d wrung it from the back of her throat. She felt a thread snap somewhere inside her.

“You utter boor...! You really thought I would leave you like that?! What were

you thinking, leaping into battle all by yourself?!”

Even harebrained, naive Connie knew that had been tantamount to suicide.

He hadn’t glanced back even once as he flew into the hurricane of bullets. She truly thought she would have a heart attack. Maybe she was a burden. But that couldn’t have been the best strategy. There must have been plenty of other options.

There must have been a way for them both to make it out alive.

But even as she yelled at him with all her might, he simply stood there with his mouth hanging open, confusion on his face. His obliviousness only made her angrier.

Connie raised her fists and beat them as hard as she could against his chest.

“It’s...it’s so maddening! Your Excellency...Boor Excellency...!”

His muscular chest was harder than she’d expected, and her tender maiden’s fists, unused to such exertion, soon began to ache. She frowned, and he backed away, flustered, before giving her a puzzled look.

“Boor Excellency...?”

“Yes, you’re being a boor, so I called you Boor Excellency! Do you have a problem with that?!”

She glared at him. His cerulean eyes grew round with confusion and shock. After a second, very quietly, he burst out laughing.

Connie gasped. “Why would you laugh at a moment like this...?”

Randolph lowered his brows in consternation. “Why are you...crying?”

She hadn’t even realized tears were spilling from her eyes. Huge droplets flowed down her cheeks.

“...Because I was terrified!”

“That’s why I told you to escape!”

She couldn’t ignore his I-told-you-so tone. She jerked her chin up and snapped, “No!”

Of course she had been afraid of the flying bullets, but even more than that—

“I was afraid *you* were going to die! How foolish are you?! Boor Excellency! You huge, foolish boor...!”

Her voice was shaking. She couldn't breathe right, and she was sobbing convulsively. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand, her shoulders heaving. As she rubbed fiercely at her eyes, Randolph gently took her hand, stopping her.

“I was scared, too.”

His voice was calm.

“I thought I was going to lose you.”

She looked up slowly.

“We're just the same, Connie.”

Randolph Ulster gently narrowed his eyes, blue as a cloudless sky, and gazed at her.

Surprised—shocked, really—Connie stopped crying and stared at him, her eyes wide.

What was this?

“...I-if you think I'll forgive everything just because you laughed, you're wrong...!” she squeaked, refusing to admit defeat. Randolph's shoulders shook with poorly suppressed laughter. Connie felt her heart contract; she didn't know what to do.

She glanced around uncertainly. His voice halting, Randolph said, “...If you can forgive me...”

His voice was so quiet, she had to strain her ears to hear him.

“If you can forgive me, I'd like to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Without her noticing, the moon had moved out from behind the clouds. Pale white light poured down from the sky, gently illuminating the world below. Connie took a long breath, then let it out.

“In that case, I forgive you.”



The words slipped easily from her mouth. Tinted by the moonlight, those cerulean eyes wavered with emotion.

“I forgive you. Even if the king doesn’t, or the kingdom, or your great-uncle, or anyone else. Even if the gods don’t forgive you, I forgive you for everything. So you don’t need to worry about anything at all.”

I’m being so bold, she thought, *Scarlett Castiel herself wouldn’t have dared make such a declaration*. But it was the truth, and there was nothing she could do about that. No matter what anyone else said, Connie forgave him. Of course she forgave him.

If it would make this absurdly awkward man happy, Constance Grail would challenge the goddesses to a fistfight.

“And if anyone says anything bad about you...”

“...Yes?”

Connie held up her palm and grinned. “Then I’ll slap them!” she announced boldly.

Randolph’s eyes widened in surprise. Then he burst out laughing. “Sometimes you say the craziest things.”

“Sorry... I-it’s a bad habit of mine...”

She knew what she had said was shameless. As she unconsciously shrank back, Randolph looked at her as if she were as bright as the sun.

“Try not to push yourself so hard... It’s far too charming.”



With the burlap bag still over his shoulder, the *kidnapper* led Lucia to a covered wagon tied up behind the abandoned house.

“A little present for you, Shoshanna.”

As he said this, Salvador pushed aside the canvas cloth hanging at the entrance to the wagon and tossed the burlap bag to the girl sitting inside. Shoshanna, as he’d called her, looked over her shoulder in surprise at the dull thud. She looked a few years older than Lucia, with clear, even features and

silver hair that fell straight as an arrow to her waist. Her large eyes were the color of garnets.

When she noticed Lucia standing with her hand still in Salvador's, she frowned.

"There's m-more of them...?!" she squealed. Salvador tried to smooth it over with that careless laugh of his.

"Um, well, when it comes to pets, the more the merrier, right?"

The silver-haired girl looked back and forth between the bag and Lucia, then hung her head and wailed.

"You mean I'm supposed to take care of her, too...? I knew it... I just knew it...!"

The two of them seemed very familiar. They didn't look alike, but Lucia thought they might be siblings. Just then, the burlap bag started to wriggle. Lucia stepped away from Salvador and untied the string around the mouth of the bag.

A handsome little boy crawled out. She was sure he was the one who had cried for help earlier. She breathed a sigh of relief. He was alive—although horribly pale and dressed in rags.

But he was alive.

She smiled kindly as she watched him tense his body warily and look around.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Lucia O'Brian. What's your name?" she asked, stooping down to his level. A glimmer of light returned to his gloomy eyes. *So he's still all right*, she thought.

His heart hasn't died yet.

His violet eyes slowly focused on Lucia.

"Ulysses."

Lucia O'Brian was missing.

Deborah Darkian was named a prime suspect based on Leticia's testimony and was eventually found, severely injured, in front of the convent where she

was supposed to be held. They said she was not in a state to talk. She was receiving treatment, but so far, an interview was out of the question.

Abigail had been working around the clock to find Lucia. Maximilian, whose daughter Lucia had saved, said he would do anything to help.

But they could find no clues.

San and Eularia were busy with another matter. Perhaps for related reasons, Ambassador Kendall Levine was planning to leave Adelbide soon and return to Faris.

Ulysses's whereabouts were still unknown. Currently, several members of Randolph's unit were investigating Kiara Grafton, but she wouldn't talk. She had nearly died once and seemed afraid of Daeg Gallus's vengeance. Plus, even if she did talk, she was unlikely to know the prince's new location.

The only clue they had so far concerned the explosive used on the wharf. The black gunpowder was from Melvina. Melvina had some of the few saltpeter mines on the continent, but because of tariff conflicts and Melvina's own restrictions, Adelbide didn't allow the import of saltpeter or any weapons made with it.

A connection with Melvina suggested the weapon had come from the Luze domain, overseen by Cecilia's birth family. The domain shared a border with Melvina, and more importantly, the Viscountess Luze came from an upper-class Melvinan family. Evidence of smuggling was piling up, and the Security Force planned to summon the Luzes to the capital within the next few days.

However...

"The king is going to Melvina?" Connie asked, confused. Randolph nodded.

"Yes. Apparently, he plans to negotiate a new treaty in exchange for dropping the current smuggling allegations. I'm guessing they'll lower the tariffs and loosen the restrictions on saltpeter and firearms. They've been talking about it for years, but this is a big step forward in negotiations."

The exact schedule hadn't been announced yet, but word was King Ernst would depart soon for Melvina. It was being called a goodwill mission, but apparently the real aim was to finalize a treaty. Duran Belsford, commandant of

the Security Force, was to oversee security.

“Removing the restrictions on importing weapons will serve as a check on Faris, too.”

One of the reasons the hawkish faction in Faris supported war was the country’s buddy-buddy relationship with Melvina. Faris was importing large amounts of explosives and gunpowder while requesting limits on those exports to Adelbide, thus reducing their military power.

But if the king’s visit led to a new trade treaty between Adelbide and Melvina, Faris would no longer have the advantage. However much the hawks pushed for war, any decision would require serious debate.

Randolph’s explanation put Connie’s mind at ease.



“A little noble girl? No, I haven’t seen anyone like that.”

This shop, too, turned up no clues. Connie sighed as she continued down busy Anastasia Street. She had learned that Lucia was missing as soon as she returned from the Grafton domain. When she thought about how such a young girl must feel in that situation, she couldn’t bear to sit at home doing nothing.

Lucia wasn’t the only one she was worried about. Leticia Castiel had said, eyes puffy and red, “It’s my fault Lucia was kidnapped.” Connie heard she’d tried to run away from home multiple times, only to be caught and returned. She was blaming herself mercilessly, and Connie felt bad for her. It upset her to see such a little girl looking so haggard, so Connie had made her a promise.

No matter what, I’ll save Lucia.

Leticia said she and Lucia had encountered Deborah in an alley off Anastasia Street. The Security Force had already investigated, but Connie came anyway, hoping to find something they’d overlooked. So far, she hadn’t found anything.

She was walking along, feeling ashamed, when someone called her name.

“Constance Grail?”

She turned around and gasped. “Pamela...?”

It was Pamela Francis, the girl who had set her up at the Grand Merillian and been taken down in turn by Scarlett.

She looked quite different now. Her pale golden hair had lost its luster, and her cheeks were hollow. Dark, sunken bags hung under her eyes. Although Connie could still detect a shadow of her charming former self, the transformation was chilling.

“It’s been a while,” she said. Her fathomless smile looked as if it had been cut straight out of some portrait. “You look the same, just as you did that night. I’m sure of it. After all, I dream of that ball every time I fall asleep... What about me? I’ve changed a little, haven’t I?”

Connie stood frozen in place, and Pamela stared at her, spellbound. After a moment, she continued in a whisper.

“Actually, I saw you a few days ago. At a warehouse on a wharf in the Grafton domain.”

Connie’s shoulders gave a jolt. “I—I think you must be mistaken...”

“Do you? Oh, and I heard there was a gunfight. Some people died. Troubling, isn’t it? Were you there, by chance?”

“I t-told you, you must be mistaken—”

“Is that so?”

Her bloodshot eyes rolled in Connie’s direction as she curled her chapped lips into a twisted smile. A shiver ran down Connie’s back.

“Then never mind,” she said, looking awfully satisfied. “Good-bye. *See you again.*”



In the royal bedroom at Elbaite Palace, Cecilia bore down on Enrique.

“...What do you mean?”

Her voice was edged with irritation.

“You’ve never said a word about signing a treaty with Melvina before.”

For the past several days, Cecilia had been absorbed in responding to the

scandal in the Luze domain. The secret smuggling of saltpeter from Melvina had been exposed. Fortunately, the only person arrested was a mere pawn who could offer little in the way of information or evidence. There wasn't much chance the investigation would reach Cecilia, but it had distracted her enough that she had failed to notice disquieting developments at the palace. By the time she received a report, King Ernst had already left the country.

"How strange," Enrique interrupted calmly, his delicate, feminine face blank. "I can't imagine why you're so upset over something like opening up trade with Melvina."

But despite the softness of his voice, his magenta eyes watched her unwaveringly. Finally, it dawned on her what was going on.

"...How long have you known?"

As far as she could tell, it was around the time she'd poisoned the colleague who had kidnapped Kate Lorraine that he'd grown obviously distant. She'd known he had questions about her identity, but she hadn't thought he had any evidence.

So when had he figured it out?

Unsurprisingly, he answered in the same calm tone.

"Why do you think I went against everyone around me to marry you? Why do you think my father and Duke Castiel accepted our marriage?"

Ten years ago, Cecilia's assignment had been to win the love of the bothersome crown prince and manipulate him from the shadows. It had not been to marry him and become crown princess. But in the end, that had been his wish. She hadn't rejected the proposal, in part because doing so would have been difficult for someone of such low rank, but also because she hadn't taken seriously the possibility that the marriage would be permitted.

But it had been permitted.

Until now, she had never thought to wonder why.

"...Don't tell me you knew from the start."

Then why—she began to ask, only for the words to catch in her throat. It'd all

been for this moment. To get close to Cecilia, a member of Daeg Gallus, and put a stop to their plans. In other words, he'd used her—and the Luze domain.

"I did indeed. I was so *devoted* to you, you see. Who would question a husband who looked into the activities of his beloved wife, or visited her hometown? I know all about what you and your people were doing in the Luze domain."

He had always been a simple man. She had been able to trick him because he was simple. He had believed Scarlett betrayed him because he was simple. He had never questioned his sense of justice because he was simple. And later, when he realized his mistake, he had regretted it.

Cecilia had always thought him a careless, stupid man.

"...And what will you do now?"

"You oversaw the smuggling in the Luze domain, didn't you? We have evidence. And in this kingdom, criminals are punished."

"...If this becomes public, you may be suspected of criminal activity yourself."

If the crimes of the crown princess were exposed, her husband would no doubt be made to take some responsibility.

"Didn't you know?" he asked, his smile vanishing at last. "I've been a criminal for a very long time."

He reached for the water pitcher and slowly poured himself a glass. He brought it to his lips and drank it down.

Cecilia looked down and sighed. "Enrique."

She had spent ten years of her life with this man, however warped their relationship had been. He looked at her with a puzzled expression. So it was as she'd always thought.

"It seems you are a careless man after all."

The next instant, he began to cough violently. The blood drained from his face, and he began to wheeze. Cecilia looked down on him, blank-faced, and drew a deep breath.

“Somebody, help! Enrique is having an attack!”

The maids who had been waiting outside the room rushed in. When they saw Enrique gasping on the ground, they ran back out to call the royal doctor.

Cecilia took advantage of the sudden commotion to leave the villa.

She went to the office of the comptroller-general.

When Simon Darkian was imprisoned, all his high-level colleagues had resigned, leaving his lowly assistant, Rufus May, to leap into the position of vice-comptroller-general. Since Comptroller-General Colbert was currently *undergoing treatment for an illness*, Rufus was, in practice, in charge of the organization.

“You didn’t kill him?” Rufus asked in a tone that might be read as critical. Having dismissed everyone else in the office, he was now reclining in an armchair with an attitude so relaxed, one would have thought he had always held this position.

Cecilia shrugged. The substance she’d added to the pitcher wasn’t poison.

“Whatever else he is, he’s still the crown prince. We’ll have an easier time of it with him alive. If you’ve received a report, then you probably know what condition he’s in. He won’t be up and about for quite a while, let alone acting as king in Ernst’s stead. Just as you wished.”

“Oh, I have no complaints. If he’d died, that would have been a problem all its own.”

Rufus—that is, Krishna of Daeg Gallus—rested his chin in his hand and observed Cecilia with narrowed eyes.

“But you let that redheaded reporter go, too. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“Is there some problem?” she answered coldly.

Krishna turned his lips up into a crescent shape. But his eyes weren’t smiling. “No. But I’m concerned. Neither you nor Salvador have officially sworn allegiance to the organization. Salvador isn’t so hard to understand. But you, Cess—”

He paused. His silver-blue eyes surveyed Cecilia mockingly.

“You, I think, were just a little girl after a target for your rage.”

Cecilia didn’t answer. She didn’t feel the need to. Krishna could hardly have expected one from her. Paying no attention to her reaction, he continued.

“Let’s return to the problem at hand. It will certainly be annoying if they sign a treaty with Melvina, but the situation does have some advantages. Ernst and Duran Belford are both away. Adolphus Castiel is a pain, but most likely he’ll be busy taking care of Enrique. And Kendall Levine has returned to Faris.”

Krishna grinned.

“If we’re going to do it, now is the time.”

Cecilia was not surprised by his words. She knew they were out of time. She nodded and turned to leave so she could begin preparations.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Krishna muttered as she put her hand on the door. “First, we’d better take care of anyone who might get in the way. Just to be safe, you know.”

His voice was chillingly sadistic.



The kidnapping of Prince Ulysses was made public several days after King Ernst left for Melvina. The king’s party had already crossed the border. Even the fastest horse would take several days to reach him with the message, and he would need another few days to return to Adelbide.

The criminal group behind the kidnapping was said to be a domestic extremist organization bent on destroying the alliance with Faris. Outraged that the safety of the young prince was in jeopardy, Faris was ready to declare war.

To the innocent public, it was like lightning from a clear sky. Adelbide was as unsteady as a rowboat out to sea in a ferocious storm. Day after day, the tabloids were filled with news of the crisis.

Connie let out a slow breath. *So this is how it happens*, she thought.

She had never imagined it would play out like this.

“Scarlett, I forbid you to touch them!” she said, reining in her accomplice, who was staring at the *intruders* as if trying to curse them to death with her eyes.

“If you lash out now, they’ll hit back. We don’t want Layli and the others to be hurt.”

Anger flashed in Scarlett’s beautiful eyes for an instant before she bit her lip and stepped back.

They could hear sweet little Layli shouting something in the distance. The head maid, Marta, was desperately restraining him as he tried to run toward Connie, just as Connie had asked her to. It was the same request she’d made of Scarlett.

They were not to resist.

But Marta’s face was white as a sheet as she hugged Layli to her chest, and her whole body, which seemed large enough to take on a bear, was shaking with rage. Everyone was. All the servants in the Grail residence were terrified for Connie’s sake, their faces openly hostile. Her heart hurt seeing them.

“Constance Grail?”

The man who’d burst into the Grail residence along with his unit introduced himself as Jeorg Gaina. He had narrow eyes the color of a cloudy sky and thin lips. His sandy hair was plastered back from his forehead. He looked somewhat older than Randolph.

He pulled a warrant from his breast pocket and smiled as if he couldn’t contain his amusement.

“I am arresting you for the crime of aiding and abetting the kidnapping of Ulysses Faris.”

“It was quite a coincidence. Until just recently, I was unwell, but I’ve been much better lately. I went to the Grafton domain on the recommendation of my doctor. It’s by the seashore, you know. I simply love the sea. At the wharf, I became separated from my maid... Yes, I’m certain it was Constance Grail. I wouldn’t mistake a childhood friend. She was stuffing a child into a carriage in a terrible hurry, and the child was wailing and sobbing. I tried calling out to her,

but just then the gunfight started. It was so frightening, I ran away. But that child. When I think back on it, I'm certain it was Prince Ulysses."

The girl with the silver-white hair let out a high-pitched peal of laughter. The middle-aged detective questioning her continued in a serious tone.

"You said there was a gunfight. Did Constance Grail fire back?"

"No. It was the man she was with. I didn't get a good look at his face, but she's engaged to a lieutenant commander in the Security Force, isn't she? I'm not certain, but I think it was him. He looked like he was used to handling a gun."

She laughed again.

"I couldn't stop thinking about it, so instead of returning to my domain, I came to the capital to find Constance and ask her myself. She got terribly flustered and insisted I must have mistaken her for someone else. My maids were nearby. You can ask them—they'll tell you I'm not lying. But to think, the sincere Miss Grail telling a lie... I'm certain something frightening must be going on. That's why I decided to come forward with my testimony."

"The good-for-nothing weasel!" Kyle Hughes muttered, scratching his head.

The situation was completely unfair. Pamela Francis had appeared out of nowhere, and there were no obvious inconsistencies in her testimony.

It was true that Constance Grail and her fiancé Randolph had gone to the Grafton domain. It was also undeniable that an explosion and a gunfight had taken place there. Dead bodies had been found at the site. According to Jeorg Gaina, they were probably informants hired by Faris to search for Prince Ulysses.

Obviously, that was hogwash, but the dead don't talk. True, the corpses in this case all belonged to worthless hooligans, who could easily have been informants connected to the underworld. Kyle had worked with Morie in the Alchemy Division to examine them down to the location of their moles, but he hadn't found the signature sun tattoo of Daeg Gallus. They were probably disposable mercenaries.

The galling thing was, Randolph had also been taken into custody based on

Pamela Francis's testimony. He was still only a key witness, but depending on the outcome of Constance Grail's interrogation, he could be imprisoned.

Kyle pounded the stained wall, and it reverberated with a dull thud. He bit his lip hard, then turned to his subordinates, who were practically catatonic with disbelief.

"We're going to find Ulysses!" he growled.

That was their only way out.

After being brought in by Jeorg Gaina, Connie was questioned in a room in the Security Force headquarters. Gaina was conducting the interrogation, and a secretary sat in one corner taking down Connie's answers.

"Where is the prince now?"

"...I don't know. I didn't kidnap him."

"That's what all the criminals say. Or did Randolph Ulster put you up to it? We already have Pamela Francis's testimony. She said he pulled his gun."

Connie gaped at him and shook her head. He snorted in amusement. That was when she realized.

This is a farce.

Right now, Randolph was probably being questioned as well. That would delay the search for Ulysses, making war even more inevitable.

The enemy already knew everything when they set this up. It was pointless to be sincere and tell them the truth. It would only be a waste of time. Then what should she do? *Think! You must not give up! There is always a way.* Never mind herself—she couldn't let them pin down Randolph.

Oh, now there's an idea!

Connie slowly lifted her head.

There was just one thing she could do.

"Earl Ulster knows nothing. It was someone else," she said decisively. Jeorg Gaina frowned slightly, as if he didn't know what this slip of a girl was up to. His reaction confirmed her suspicions—he was probably involved in Daeg Gallus.

Their goal was to buy time. They were trying to immobilize anyone who might get in the way of their plan.

Connie squeezed her shaking fingers and smiled to hide the fear welling up inside her.

Sincerity be damned.

"I separated from the earl at the wharf. After that, I met with my accomplice. I'm certain he was the one Pamela saw."

"Connie!" Scarlett exclaimed, her eyes wide with disbelief. "What are you saying...?!"

Her face was turning pale—an unusual sight. Connie squeezed her hand into a fist and kept talking.

"Yes, that's right. I helped kidnap Prince Ulysses. But Earl Ulster had nothing to do with it. I had support from other quarters. An enormous, cruel criminal organization that would not hesitate to kill to achieve its aims."

If the enemy wanted to stall by interrogating Connie and Randolph, then she might as well confess.

"...What are you saying?"

"I think you know. I made my first move at Viscount Hamsworth's ball at the Grand Merillian. Earl Ulster wasn't there that night."

"Connie, you fool! You insufferable fool!" Scarlett cried, her voice shaking as tears pooled in her eyes.

I'm sorry, Scarlett. I really am, Connie whispered over and over in her heart.

"The name of the organization is Daeg Gallus."

A white-faced Jeorg Gaina was shaking his head from side to side. *Serves you right!* Connie thought. She turned to the openmouthed secretary with a smile.

"Did you write that down? Yes? Then you must know what to do next. The suspect confessed to the crime. If I were you, the first thing I'd do would be to release Randolph Ulster."

Connie found herself in a detention cell with a cold draft. After the

interrogation, Jeorg Gaina had roughly grabbed her arm and thrown her inside. The only thing behind the iron bars with Connie was a worn-out blanket.

After Gaina, still agitated, disappeared, Connie sat rubbing the red spot on her arm. Scarlett glanced around and snorted with dissatisfaction. Then she fell silent. She was apparently quite furious.

Connie leaned against the cold wall and pressed her forehead to her knees. After a while, the iron door opened with a rusty creak.

“This place hasn’t changed at all.”

In walked Viscount Hamsworth, his barrel-shaped body shaking like pudding.

“I was here once ten years ago. I came to see Scarlett Castiel.”

Connie slowly looked up and gave Scarlett a questioning glance. She was looking the other way, as if to say she had nothing to do with any of this.

“Still, I’m surprised,” Hamsworth said with an incongruously bright smile. “To think that you of all people would call for a clergyman.”

The teachings of the church permitted prisoners to beg forgiveness of the gods. The Security Forces were not able to refuse a request to see a priest.

Connie had asked to see Hamsworth right after Gaina finished interrogating her.

“Although I can hardly imagine you called me here to repent.”

In response to the viscount’s mischievous wink, Connie offered a quiet smile.

“What in the world are you up to?!”

When she saw Randolph come rushing to her cell all out of breath, she felt overwhelming relief. If he was here, that meant he must have been released unharmed.

“And I don’t just mean the crazy story you told Gaina! Hamsworth, too...!”

It seemed that Ham moved faster than his ponderous size might suggest. Just as Connie was thinking how impressive that was, a low, threatening voice interrupted her.

“You’re abandoning me?”

The expression on Randolph's face reminded her of a lost little boy. She gave a small, strained smile.

Needless to say, she hadn't called for Hamsworth in order to confess. She'd called him to break off her engagement to Randolph.

The viscount agreed with surprising ease. She knew it was a selfish thing to do, but she didn't regret it. She was sure he would have never done it himself.

That would have been a problem. As long as he had a connection to someone involved in the prince's kidnapping, he would be barred from continuing his investigation of the matter. And that was just what the enemy wanted.

She'd always been a burden to him, but this was one thing she could do to help. She wasn't giving up. Not too long ago, she probably would have. But she was different now. She had confidence in other people—enough confidence to leave the rest to them.

It wasn't just Randolph. She had friends who at this very moment were doing their utmost to solve the mystery. She trusted that they would rescue Ulysses and Lucia.

That they would preserve the future of the kingdom.

"...What will you do?" Randolph asked. "Who's going to marry a girl who's broken off two previous engagements?"

He was at a loss. His eyes, as blue as the sea on a sunny day, wavered. The blue was so clear, she felt she was falling into it—

So deep, it took her breath away.

She gazed quietly into his eyes.

"If," she whispered. "If, when everything is over, there comes a day when we can all laugh together again, there's one person I'm going to seek out. Someone very strong and kind, and always just. Someone who, despite all that, thinks he doesn't have the right to make another person happy. What a fool he is! So next time, I'll be the one to go to him and take his hand."

"...That won't be easy."

She froze in the face of this flat rejection. But then, hesitantly, Randolph held

out his arms.

“Because I’m certain,” he whispered, nearly inaudible, “that before you can do that, someone will ask you to marry him. Someone with no domain, who never manages to be clever, and always chooses the worst places for dates—yes, that horribly dull man will beat you to it.”

Connie stared at him wide-eyed for a second, then broke into a grin. She took the hand he’d extended and pressed it to her cheek. His knobby fingers were surprisingly hot. Tears spilled from her eyes when she blinked. Before they could travel down her cheek, a rough, dry finger wiped them away.

Randolph looked down at her and frowned, a troubled expression on his face.

Ah, Connie thought. I love this man.

She gave him a watery smile, but the crease between his brows only deepened. He looked frightening, but endearing at the same time. As she looked up, the masculine, angry-looking face moved closer to hers. For a second, a shadow fell over her. Before she could register surprise, his warm lips brushed her forehead.

“...My forehead?” she asked, blinking in confusion.

“...Well, you’re not my fiancée at the moment,” he replied, and she couldn’t help smiling at the dissatisfaction in his voice. Then, for a little while, she cried.

The next day, Scarlett disappeared.



After visiting his older brother, Enrique, in his sickbed, Johan sighed inwardly. Although Enrique’s condition had stabilized, it was still unclear if he would pull through.

Just when the king was away, a prince from neighboring Faris had been kidnapped. It was totally unprecedented. Normally, Enrique would have handled the response, but right now he was tottering between life and death—hardly capable of weathering the storm. Until now, Johan had occupied the relatively easy position of second prince. But for the past several days, he’d had the overwhelming task of serving in the king’s stead. Duke Castiel, ordinarily a

reliable pillar of support, was nowhere to be seen. Presumably, he was busy taking care of Enrique.

Enrique's collapse had been attributed to a worsening of his chronic asthma, but that wasn't the truth. According to Adolphus, someone had cleverly set him up. He hadn't been poisoned, but rather given an ordinary painkiller. That was why the royal taster hadn't detected any problem. But this particular painkiller, extracted from willow bark, had induced asthma attacks in the prince ever since he was a boy.

"Prince Johan, may I speak with you?"

"...Is that you, Rufus?"

Johan had pushed aside his stack of papers and was taking a moment to massage his temples when the very source of his recent headaches stepped into his office. Rufus May, vice-comptroller-general. As far as Johan could remember, May had always blended into the woodwork, but ever since he took over Simon's position, he was like a fish skillfully navigating the raging seas of state.

"Faris wants war. They have their honor to consider, after all. We need to show them what we're capable of if we want them to back down," Rufus said, placing on the desk the same draft decision he'd brought to Johan a few days earlier. The memory of how he'd dismissed the ridiculous document out of hand was still fresh in Johan's mind.

"Constance Grail has confessed to her crime. All that remains is for you to make a decision."

"...I read the report, and it seems the girl was only an accessory. Doesn't that mean the real culprit is still on the loose? The one from that organization, whatever it was called. It's too early for me to make a decision. If it's unavoidable, I'd prefer to consult Duke Castiel first—"

His words were interrupted by the clatter of something being set on the desk in front of him. He looked down. It was an exquisite hair ornament. He knew it well. He had ordered a craftsman to make the clip, fashioned from pearl-encrusted coral, for his daughter's third birthday. She adored it and wore it nearly every day. Or so he thought—

The blood drained from his face.

“Where the hell did you get that...?”

“Your daughter’s nurse is called Hannah, I believe? Oh, don’t worry, we haven’t harmed a hair on either of their heads. Not yet, that is.”

Johan was speechless.

“Your Highness,” Rufus May continued in a kind voice. “Would you like to hold your darling daughter in your arms again?”

Goose bumps rose on Johan’s skin.

“You will; of course you will. But as for whether her little body is warm or cold, that depends on you. It’s not a difficult decision, is it? The girl is only a viscount’s daughter, after all.”

“...You lowlife,” Johan spat out contemptuously. But Rufus’s smile remained placid. Johan glanced up at the ceiling as if to seek salvation, then, with a shaking hand, he picked up the royal seal.

That day, special editions of the papers were published in Alslain, the capital of Adelbide.

A sentence had been handed down to the viscount’s daughter currently imprisoned for her involvement in the kidnapping of the seventh prince of Faris. All the articles were unanimous in their assessment. Even given the need to appease their neighbor, the lightning-speed decision screamed “scapegoat.”

The sentence, handed down by royal order...

...would be the first public execution in a decade.

[List of Current Characters]



**Constance
Grail**

Sixteen-year-old who has gone from minor player to commander of the attack force. Was finally starting to narrow the emotional distance between her and her unpredictable fiancé, only to be physically separated from him. Tried a risky strategy of putting herself on the line, but was not expecting the result to be execution.



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old who's furious that all these damn characters keep getting in the way of her revenge...! A lot more concerned about her revenge than all this war nonsense. However, since a certain hopeless girl keeps sticking her neck into other people's business, she has no choice but to go along with it. Incidentally, the whole time those two were acting out that clichéd proposal melodrama on the wharf, she was wishing they'd just blow themselves up. Whereabouts currently unknown. ←new!



**Randolph
Ulster**

Has finally surrendered to his fiancée and her unpredictable, relentless activities. After various twists and turns, ultimately decided to live life simply as Randolph, not as an Ulster, only to have said fiancée falsely accused, imprisoned, and sentenced to execution. Cannot keep up. If born in different times, would probably have become Darth Vader.



**Deborah
Darkian**

The original Zouzou, was friends with Abby as a child but at some point went astray. Husband Simon is merely her pawn. After marriage, she was involved in various crimes unrelated to the rooster. Basically, detests Abby and digs her own grave by going after her, like some stereotypical villain in a Showa-era girl's manga. A little pitiable by the end.



Salvador

Psychopath who pulls his knife the second he's annoyed. Has various personal rules about not hurting children, but that doesn't make him a nice guy. Despite being an official member of the rooster club, has zero pride or passion regarding his work for such a legendary organization and instead considers quitting every time there's a tiny problem, just like every other kid today. Basically doesn't want to work.



Lucia O'Brian

Accidental psychic who's at the mercy of her sixth sense. She's been through a lot, but right now her main worry is whether or not her dear friend Lettie was able to make it home safely.



**Ulysses
Faris**

Cute but unfortunate young boy who was kidnapped early in the story but keeps getting pushed to the side for the sake of other plot developments. Although he finally regained the spotlight, his ordeals appear far from over.



Pamela Francis

Returning like Sadako from the well and making everything a lot more complicated.

Holding a torch in one hand, Shoshanna stepped into the damp cavern.

Apparently, the new hideout was a stone's throw from the palace, underneath a building in one corner of the famous plaza. The upstairs seemed to be some sort of museum. Nearby was a building where public officials came and went, and the amount of foot traffic made Shoshanna anxious. Salvador, who had nerves of steel, showed no sign of concern.

Making her way through the spider's web of passages, she eventually came to a stone cell closed off by iron bars. This dungeon, which could not by any stretch of the imagination be called clean, was where the children in her charge were being kept.

"Hey, what's your name?"

An oddly cheerful voice echoed off the arched stone walls.

The new hostage was proving no less trouble than the prince. Or were all hostages equally troublesome? Shoshanna, who knew nothing of the world, had no idea.

"Then can I choose one for you? Melanie? Sarah? No, neither of those is quite right. Oh, I know—*Shoshanna*."

Shoshanna's shoulders twitched.

"That's it, isn't it?"

The girl's eyes sparkled playfully. Only then did Shoshanna remember that Salvador had called her by name when they met at the covered wagon.

"Who knows?"

She had no intention of befriending her hostages. She snorted and looked away.

"You're very kind, Shoshanna," the girl said casually.

"How's that?!" she said, whipping her head around at this unexpected

comment.

Her eyes met the girl's. To her surprise, she couldn't find a drop of anger, resentment, or despair. Her eyes were as clear as a still pond.

"Well, you never hit us even if we disobey, you feed us properly, and you let us clean ourselves. You even clean our cell."

Shoshanna was dumbstruck by this noble girl who could remain so relaxed at a moment like this.

What a bloody hassle this job was.

As usual, Salvador had left the care of the hostages entirely up to her. It seemed his job ended when he threw them in the cell. She knew he was busy, but did he really have to go back to work so quickly?

In his place, he'd left a middle-aged guard. The man looked like a typical hoodlum with a brawny build. The first words out of his mouth—"I've killed more people than I can count on both hands"—were pretty much standard for petty criminals. Nevertheless, Shoshanna kept her distance and added him to her mental list of people to watch out for.

That day, as she was walking through the cool cavern having returned from a shopping trip, she heard a shrill scream. At first, she thought it might have come on a draft blowing in from above, but it hadn't.

The only thing ahead of her was the cell holding the two hostages. She dashed forward, the hair on her arms standing on end.

"What are you doing?!"

For some reason, the guard wasn't outside the cell as usual, but inside. At his feet, Lucia was sobbing, her arm pressed to the ground. Ulysses stood in front of her with both arms flung out as he glared at the guard.

"I didn't like the sound of their whisperin'. We'll be in a hell of a fix if they bolt."

It sounded like a lie. He didn't need a reason. The man kicked Lucia with the toe of his boot. She screamed in pain as her little body rolled over.

"Get out."

Shoshanna's voice was low.

"...Eh?"

"Didn't you hear me? Get out of the cell right now. Your job here is to be a guard. That's all. I'm the one in charge of caring for them, not you. I don't need anyone doing my job for me."

The man scowled down at Shoshanna. She narrowed her eyes and recited the magic words.

"If you lift a finger against them again, I'll tell Salvador."

There was silence, followed by the sound of the man clicking his tongue. He threw a final irritated glance at Shoshanna, kicked the iron bars with all his might, and left. Apparently, he didn't intend to humbly return to his post. The sound of angry footsteps echoed through the cavern, finally fading into silence.

The poor little girl was still shivering in fear—or was she?

"...Huh?" Shoshanna blurted out.

"Uly, that simply won't do," Lucia O'Brian said, looking completely unfazed as she sprang up from the ground. "You must never show your strength in a situation like that. You'll only enflame their cruelty. Instead, you must make them feel satisfied with the minimum amount of violence. Did you see that man's build? He could squash you with his pinky. I'm sure he had a gun on him, too. You must realize you didn't have a chance of beating him. Your determination to protect a lady is admirable, but it's about as useful as a mouse's poop. It would have been far more effective to sob and plead for mercy. The important thing is to wait for your chance, and to preserve your strength for that moment."

No matter how hard she looked, Shoshanna couldn't find a single trace of tears on the girl's cheeks.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

The prince blinked several times, then nodded. "Oh, um..."

He glanced at Lucia's red, swollen arm.

"But Lucia, he hurt you..."

“Oh, that? That’s nothing.”

Shoshanna could tell she wasn’t bluffing or protecting her pride. She was simply stating the truth. This confused the silver-haired woman. She could have understood if the girl were a commoner or a kid from the slums. But she was a noble’s daughter who had probably never carried anything heavier than a parasol!

“I’m not lying. My arm isn’t even broken, and though you might not guess it, I’m used to taking blows. Of course, I’d be grateful for a bag of ice if there was one!”

She glanced expectantly at Shoshanna, who nodded without thinking.

A smile blossomed over Lucia’s face. Shoshanna couldn’t help being drawn in by her carefree expression. Ulysses was also gazing at Lucia, his mouth slightly agape.

Still smiling innocently, she turned toward him. “Well, Uly, shall we begin with some crying practice?”

Her voice was as light and airy as that of a girl asking for a dance at a ball.

“After all, even one little trick for surviving is better than none.”

**Shoshanna**

Creature caretaker with silver hair and garnet eyes. Despite being a pretty young girl, is more domestic than a cafeteria lady. Poor thing is constantly being walked all over by her free-and-easy older brother. Taking care of one hostage was hard enough, and now there are two? Worried her already pale hair is going to turn white from the stress. At the age where all she wants to do is punch her brother Salvador.

**Ulysses Faris**

Originally eager to save Lucia after she got wrapped up in his kidnapping, but quickly gave up when he realized she was far more competent. The night Lucia was abducted, he was so relieved not to be alone anymore that he cried (but that's a secret!).

**Lucia O'Brian**

Maybe because she grew up surrounded by self-centered people, views the reserved, serious Ulysses as extremely sensitive and admirable, and instantly takes on the role of his knight in shining armor. Currently conserving her strength while she waits for a chance to escape.

Enrique was still unconscious, giving Cecilia at least some temporary relief.

Just as Krishna had planned, Second Prince Johan was ruling in his brother's stead. Of course, he couldn't manage everything himself, so Cecilia had offered to help.

She was visiting the orphanage as part of her charity work that day when a girl in a shadowy hood approached her, avoiding the notice of her guards. When she saw the girl's face, Cecilia dismissed her entourage. It was Salvador's younger sister. Cecilia knew she was the one taking care of the hostages. She glanced around warily as the girl told her she wanted a new guard.

"Why?"

"Because he's violent," she said bluntly.

The hatred in her garnet eyes was unmistakable. Cecilia thought back to the man she had assigned as the guard. He wasn't especially good at his job, but he didn't mind killing, which made him easy to use. She did remember him being a bit impulsive. No doubt he'd grown bored of standing around and thrown a punch at Prince Ulysses or the girl. It wasn't praiseworthy behavior, to be sure, but...

"You're awfully considerate of your prisoners."

"...Aren't you the ones who will be in trouble if something happens to them?"

You—Daeg Gallus. She was drawing a clear line. Cecilia observed the girl standing before her. She wasn't an official member of the organization. Salvador had picked her up somewhere when she was a little baby who could do nothing but wail. In other words, he owned her. What's more, she was the reason that carefree killer had unilaterally decided he wouldn't harm children.

Although she was young, she had pretty, even features and graceful limbs. She was fresh as a flower bud—no doubt more than one man had entertained evil thoughts about her. But Cecilia knew all too well what would happen to

anyone who dared lay a finger on her.

“I suppose I don’t have much choice.”

If the girl cried, Salvador would get nasty. So Cecilia went along with her demand. Shoshanna’s face relaxed into obvious relief. Rumor had it she was quite skilled with her hands. Apparently, she was the one who made the colored powder Salvador wore when he dressed as a southern trader. But she seemed incapable of harming a fly. Maybe that was why Salvador so stubbornly refused to give her the sun tattoo. Anyway, it didn’t matter.

Everything would be over soon.



Theophilis was looking down on the castle town from a window in his office. People the size of fingernails scurried around on the streets. He wondered how many of them realized just how close Faris was to the brink.

As he turned away, he glimpsed his own reflection in the window.

His violet eyes were proof that he, more than anyone else, was fit to be king.

He had been born into this kingdom as its fourth prince. His mother had come from a distinguished family whose men often took royal women as their brides, and from a young age, he had been told that should anything happen to the first prince, he would take over the throne.

His father, King Hendrick, had still not regained consciousness. It seemed the wolves were finally shedding their wool. They insisted on war with the kingdom’s neighbor at every turn.

True, if war did break out, money would move. That was essential for this kingdom, now on the cusp of death.

But it also carried risk. A certain number of innocent people would likely lose their lives. In that sense, he could not agree to war without reservation. Of course, he wasn’t so noble that he’d pretend to be a dove like his merciful sister Alexandra.

In short, what he needed to do was weigh his options and choose the most beneficial strategy. As the next king, he had that right.

The long game of musical chairs was finally coming to an end. Most of his siblings had given up their claim to the throne. The only ones remaining were the reclusive Second Prince Roderick, the imprisoned Third Princess Alexandra, and the missing Seventh Prince Ulysses. What challenge did any of them pose?

Everything was going frighteningly well. Even if his father never regained consciousness, sooner or later the Council would probably approve Theophilis's ascension to the throne.

But for some reason, he felt no relief. He couldn't shake off the feeling of a bone lodged in his throat.

All of a sudden, he thought of his half sister Alexandra. The public praised her to the skies as a thoughtful and fair princess, but they had it all wrong. That woman was nothing but a bully. She'd always been a rude, insensitive rascal who never thought before she acted. He couldn't even count the number of times she'd made him cry.

He couldn't stand the thought that a tyrant like her enjoyed such enormous support from a section of the populace—including both nobles and commoners. The color of her eyes was far from royal, and yet the voices calling for her succession never ceased. For Theophilis, with his highborn mother and violet eyes, she was a constant thorn in his side.

At the moment, she was locked up in the castle tower known as the Tower of Sorrow. Since long ago, royals found guilty of crimes had been imprisoned there.

Remembering this, Theophilis frowned reflexively.

People thought he was the one who had locked her up, but that wasn't quite right. One of his aides had planned it. True, he was the one who'd ordered them to "get rid of that horrible woman," but he'd never imagined they'd go so far as burning her at the stake.

They didn't have to kill her—they could just take away her succession rights and banish her to some distant land.

He'd said as much to them. After all, no matter how much he detested her, they still shared the same blood. It was only natural that he felt some resistance

to taking her life. But his words had been brushed away with the argument that if they left Alexandra alive, she would stage a coup.

At the time, it had made sense, but...

“It seems Adelbide has decided to execute the noble girl accused of participating in Ulysses’s kidnapping.”

A low voice interrupted his thoughts, bringing him back to the present. He raised his head slightly and saw it was that same aide—the one who had taken the lead in imprisoning Alexandra.

“Have they?”

Apparently, his youngest brother, who had nothing to recommend him except his pedigree, had been kidnapped by some ruffians in Adelbide.

“What are they after anyway? I can’t see how they’ll gain anything by kidnapping the boy.”

Ironically, the hawks were probably happy Ulysses had vanished. Now they had a perfect excuse to invade their neighbor, who had otherwise done nothing wrong.

Suddenly, a look of confusion crossed Theophilis’s face.

“...Do you think Adelbide really arranged all this?”

“Of course,” the aide replied, pasting an unreadable smile on his face.

Theophilis remained quiet for a moment, hoping the man would reveal his thoughts. But eventually, he shook his head. The truth would reveal itself in time.

I am the one who will be king.

A gust of wind blew in through the open window, sending documents flying. The man squatted down astutely and gathered them up.

Theophilis watched him. Suddenly, his gaze fell on the side of the man’s head. *What’s this now?* He had a small mole behind his right ear. No—it wasn’t a mole after all.

It was a tattoo of the sun.



Scarlett had vanished.

She was simply nowhere to be found. Connie was in shock.

She'd first noticed after her meeting with Randolph. Scarlett had told her from the start that she didn't get along very well with His Excellency, and at first Connie had assumed that was the reason. But the next day, she still didn't appear. Maybe she was sleeping after using up all her energy on the wharf in the Grafton domain? But in the past, she'd always been back to her usual self after half a day.

Connie had been in jail for several days now, and Scarlett was still missing.

Which must mean...

Had she run out of patience with Connie?

It was hard to imagine she'd attained eternal peace. After all, this was Scarlett. Her stubborn nature was unlikely to let her rest before she'd had her revenge.

Revenge. Locked up like this, Connie couldn't do a thing to help her. In these circumstances, it made sense that Scarlett would vanish.

Eventually, Connie was transferred from the jail to the prison. Her sentence had been decided. According to the talkative prison warden, it seemed that Constance Grail was soon to be executed.

"You have a visitor."

Connie's prison cell was small but clean. Maybe it was the same cell Scarlett had occupied ten years ago. Thinking about that lightened her mood, if only a little.

Connie stood up from the bed, where she had been sitting, and followed the guard to the meeting room. When she saw who was there, she let out a soft gasp.

"...Father."

It was none other than Percival Ethel Grail.

When he saw his daughter, his face took on a frightening look, like a bear possessed by a demon. His piercing glare was enough to kill a person.

“Constance. Tell me one thing.”

The low tone of his voice surprised her, and she unconsciously looked down.

“Do you regret what you have done?”

Connie jerked her head up, then slowly shook it from side to side.

“No.”

That was the undeniable truth. She spent every day worried and afraid, and sometimes she couldn't sleep, but she wasn't sorry for anything.

Her father sighed in deep disappointment.

“Did you spare even one thought for your father?”

Connie gave a small sob in response.

“Imagine. One day I suddenly hear my daughter has been arrested and rush to the capital, only to find she has already been sentenced to death. I truly thought my heart would stop. I saw my own departed father waving to me in the distance.”

“I'm s-sorry.”

“Now that I think back, I could tell there's been something different about you lately. I know something must have been going on. Though in that case, I wish you had come to me for help before things came to this.”

Connie knew her mother and father loved her. They must have been shocked to hear of her death sentence. She could imagine how deeply it must have pained them. Just thinking about it made her feel as though her heart were being crushed.

As she slumped in front of him, Ethel continued.

“As I was walking around the house complaining about what a coldhearted daughter you were, Marta started scolding me. ‘Just how was she supposed to count on you?! You think about that for a moment, sir!’ she said. She was right. I can't exactly complain about other people...can I? And we're such minor

nobles, with hardly any money or influence...”

His shoulders slumped dejectedly. As Connie was wondering what to do, he looked up, seeming to have revived his spirits.

“Oh yes, I almost forgot. I brought something for you,” he said, untying the string around an enormous bundle and explaining its contents piece by piece.

“This is from the young Miss Lorraine. There’s your favorite raspberry pie, some raisin bread, and I think these are honey-roasted apples. And here are some clothes from your mother, and a letter and stuffed toy from Layli. I thought you’d like something savory to go with all those sweets, so I put in some blue cheese, but one of the guards confiscated it...said it was too smelly... By the way, Marta told me with a straight face that she wished they’d lock me up instead of you. I felt like I was being sentenced to death myself—”

“Father,” Connie broke in. “Please disown me.”

Ethel was silent for a moment.

“And why should I do that?” he asked slowly.

“If my actions were to end up causing you harm—”

Right now, Connie was a notorious sinner accused of helping kidnap a young prince from the neighboring kingdom. In the event that ended up sparking a war, her whole family and all their servants could end up being punished, too.

Even if that didn’t happen, those around them would sling slander and abuse at the family. That was fine as long as Connie herself bore the brunt of their attacks. She was surprisingly impervious. Of course, the thought of being executed was scary, but she had faith that Randolph and the others would rescue her.

Still, no matter how thick her own skin was, she didn’t think she could stand seeing the people she loved suffering through no fault of their own.

She bit her lip and looked at the floor. Suddenly, she heard laughter.

“The truth is I marched straight to the palace as soon as I heard you’d been arrested and sentenced to death. I verified the charges, but I knew there was no way a daughter of mine could have done the thing they accused you of. True,

you do run off the rails sometimes, like a certain someone in the family. But you would never do such a thing. I wanted to hear your side of the story.”

“That’s...”

“But something struck me as odd, too. To start with, you were sentenced to death while His Highness was away from the kingdom. And I hear Crown Prince Enrique has been unconscious this whole time. His younger brother was the one who issued the sentence, but would such a mild fellow really do something like that? And without asking his brother or father for their opinion.”

Nevertheless, Connie had been sentenced to death.

“Something is going on.”

His voice was as calm as a tranquil sea.

“Most frustrating of all is that I have little idea what goes on in the palace. I don’t know the first thing about what’s happening right now in this kingdom. But I do know one thing. I can fight to save my daughter.”

His words, on the other hand, were not tranquil in the least. Connie jerked her head up in surprise.

“But that’s too reckless...!”

Just the other day, she had been involved in a gunfight and nearly killed in an explosion. Now those memories flickered across her mind. There was no way a minor noble family like the Grails could hold out against that kind of force.

“W-we’re lowly viscounts, without money or force of arms! And you might be big, Father, but you’ve got two left feet when it comes to physical activity...”

“As for my physique, I was just born this way. And despite my looks, I’m a devoted pacifist...”

“That only adds to my worries...!”

“Listen to me, Connie. Fighting isn’t just about physical strength. People are moved by people. That’s been true since time immemorial.”

His unexpected statement left Connie blinking in confusion.

“Back when the Ten Years’ War had just begun, Percival Grail the First

encountered many hopeless crises. But he never gave up. Why? Because he knew the secret to winning.”

The Eleventh Viscount Grail looked Connie in the eye and smiled mischievously.

“Thou shalt be sincere.”

What in the world could he mean?

“I’m relieved to have found you in such good spirits,” he said perplexingly, before heading home.

When Connie went back to her cell, it felt bigger than before. Although it was summer, it was dim and cool. She clenched her teeth and flopped facedown on the bed. The floor planks creaked loudly in response.

“...Scarlett,” she moaned quietly, but no one answered. The inside of her nose tingled, and she hurriedly pressed her face into the scratchy sheet. If she hadn’t, a very embarrassing liquid would have spilled all over her cheeks.

Where in the world has Scarlett gone?



That night, Cecilia slipped out of the castle and headed for Saint Mark’s Square. She had decided to have a look at the hostages. Shoshanna’s request had her worrying about something. Needless to say, it wasn’t the condition of the poor little captives.

From what she’d heard, Lucia O’Brian had lived until a few years ago in a world rank with violence and drugs. She’d had hardly anyone to rely on, so she must be awfully clever despite her youth.

An ordinary noble girl would be reduced to a shivering mess as she waited for someone to rescue her, but no doubt Lucia was different. If Cecilia’s hunch was right, the girl was probably searching for an opportunity to escape at this very moment.

She moved along the chilly underground passage, using the scant lighting to guide her. She was actually quite skilled at seeing in the dark.

A new guard was standing in front of the iron grate. The man was young.

Cecilia slowly pushed back her hood to reveal her face and said the password.

“Step away for a little while,” she instructed him.

The man nodded, clearly flustered by the unexpected appearance of the crown princess, then hurried away into the dark.

Cecilia peered into the cell. Ulysses was snoring, wrapped in a blanket. His expression was innocent and sweet. A blond girl was curled next to him like a mother cat protecting her kitten.

“...Do you have some business with us?” the girl asked.

So she had been awake. Or maybe the noise had roused her.

The cavern was dim, lit only by torchlight, and Cecilia had dressed shabbily so as to slip away from the castle. The girl would never guess she was the crown princess.

“I came to give you some advice.”

“Advice?”

“Yes. Advice for a courageous noble girl. If you don’t want to die, stay in line,” she said in a low, threatening voice. The girl’s eyes grew wide. Then she smiled as if she found something amusing.

“I think you’re very kind.”

“Kind?” Cecilia frowned at the unexpected word.

“Yes. Shoshanna and you both.”

She had to agree that Salvador’s sister was a pushover. But she was different. She wouldn’t hesitate to stain her hands with blood in the service of her goal.

“If someone ordered me to, I would kill you.”

Unlike that coward Salvador, she had nothing against killing a child or anyone else. The girl smiled again.

“Yes. And that’s why you’ve come, isn’t it? So that you won’t receive an order like that.”

Cecilia’s face went blank. The girl’s voice echoed across the cavern like a

gunshot.

“So that I won’t be killed.”

Mylene and Kate were sitting at a café terrace on Anastasia Street as sunlight poured down on them from the sky above.

“I simply can’t believe it!” Mylene moaned. She set her glass of fruit water on the table with a *clank*. What used to be a newspaper lay crumpled on her lap.

The article was utterly implausible. It claimed that Constance Grail of all people was involved in kidnapping the prince from Faris.

Her friend, Constance Grail? Miss Goody Two-Shoes herself?

To top it all off, it seemed Constance had already been thrown in prison. Assuming there wasn’t some mistake in the article, Mylene was certain she had been framed. After all, this was one of the sincere Grails. Whatever third-rate journalist wrote this ought to have said as much. And moreover...

“What do they mean, execution...?!”

She unconsciously brought her hand to her forehead at the horrible word. According to the article, Constance would die in ten days. Everything was happening much too fast. It felt like they were following some hackneyed script by an anonymous author.

Anger overtook her, and she clicked her tongue.

Kate remained silent, staring white-faced at the cup of steaming tea in front of her. She seemed to be brooding over something, but after a few moments, she suddenly looked up.

“After Scarlett Castiel was executed, public executions were abolished, weren’t they? Do you know why?”

“Why? Let’s see, I think a citizens’ group started a campaign.”

“A citizens’ group?”

“The Violet Association.”

Kate drew her brows together in thought.

“Mylene, do you know where their headquarters is?”

“I don’t know the exact location, but usually if you go to city hall...”

Before she could finish, Kate jumped up with a clatter. Instead of her usual warm smile, she looked ready to kill.

“Um, Kate...?”

“Thank you, Mylene!”

“Y-you’re welcome...I think? But where are you going...?”

“To rescue Connie, of course!”

“...Huh?”

“Sitting here complaining won’t stop them from executing her. I have to do something about it. This is no joke. It won’t do to simply sit here and cry over it.”

As Mylene stared at her, eyes wide, Kate announced that she had to be going, and she stormed resolutely out of the café. She was like a soldier on the way to a duel.

Mylene watched in shock as her friend left the café. The next moment, she snapped back to reality.

Her hesitation lasted only a second.

“...All right then!” she said with a nod, firing herself up by tossing back the rest of her fruit water. Kate must have been heading to the Violet Association to request they once again petition for an end to executions, just as they had ten years ago. As for Mylene...

“I’m going to prove that the pen is mightier than the sword!”



He’d always been called creepy as a child.

Maybe the reason his family had handed him over to the church before his sixth birthday wasn’t only because he was the useless fifth son of a lower noble. Maybe it was because they wanted to be rid of the uncanny boy possessed by demons as quickly as they could.

“...Demons? Did you say demons?”

When he mentioned it in passing to one of the elderly nuns, she acted as indignant as if she were the one being disparaged.

“How dare they call you a demon! Your power is a gift from the goddesses. You have a light that will save many people.”

She was a stern woman, but kind. He liked when she patted his head with her dry, wrinkled palm. But she had died soon after, from complications of pneumonia.

When the hand that had reached out to help him was so abruptly taken away, the child realized something.

There were no gods in this world.

Leaning on the altar, Hamsworth took the cigar from his mouth and puffed out a ring of smoke. Of course, smoking wasn't allowed in the church, but he wasn't worried about that. As long as no one noticed, it wouldn't be a problem. And this was an unlucky day, so it was unlikely anyone would come to pray at the church.

After he'd realized that there were no gods in this world, Hamsworth decided to live life as he pleased. No matter how far his freewheeling life was from the image of a virtuous priest, the church would never expel him. In an ironic twist, it seemed that people favored by the goddesses were quite valuable to the religious establishment.

As a rule, Dominic Hamsworth didn't believe in gods. But he knew of something very close. Close, that is, insofar as she was the object of his own private worship.

Scarlett Castiel.

Hamsworth had never encountered a soul so fierce and beautiful as hers, before or since.

That was why, ten years ago when he heard she had been arrested, he asked to see her as a priest, though she hadn't called for him.

To his surprise, despite her hopeless circumstances, the light in Scarlett's eyes burned as brightly as ever. Suppressing his excitement, he asked her a question.

“I’m so very sorry, my lady... Is there any way your humble servant can help?”

Her reply was frigid. “Get out of my sight, you eyesore.”

“What a pity. If you should change your mind, please do not hesitate to ask me for anything you need.”

“Indeed I will, if I should change my mind. Now please remove yourself from my presence.”

As it happened, those were the last words Hamsworth exchanged with her.

Suddenly, a breeze blew in. The curtain ruffled. Hamsworth looked up slowly. Of course, no one was there.

“You can drop the little act.”

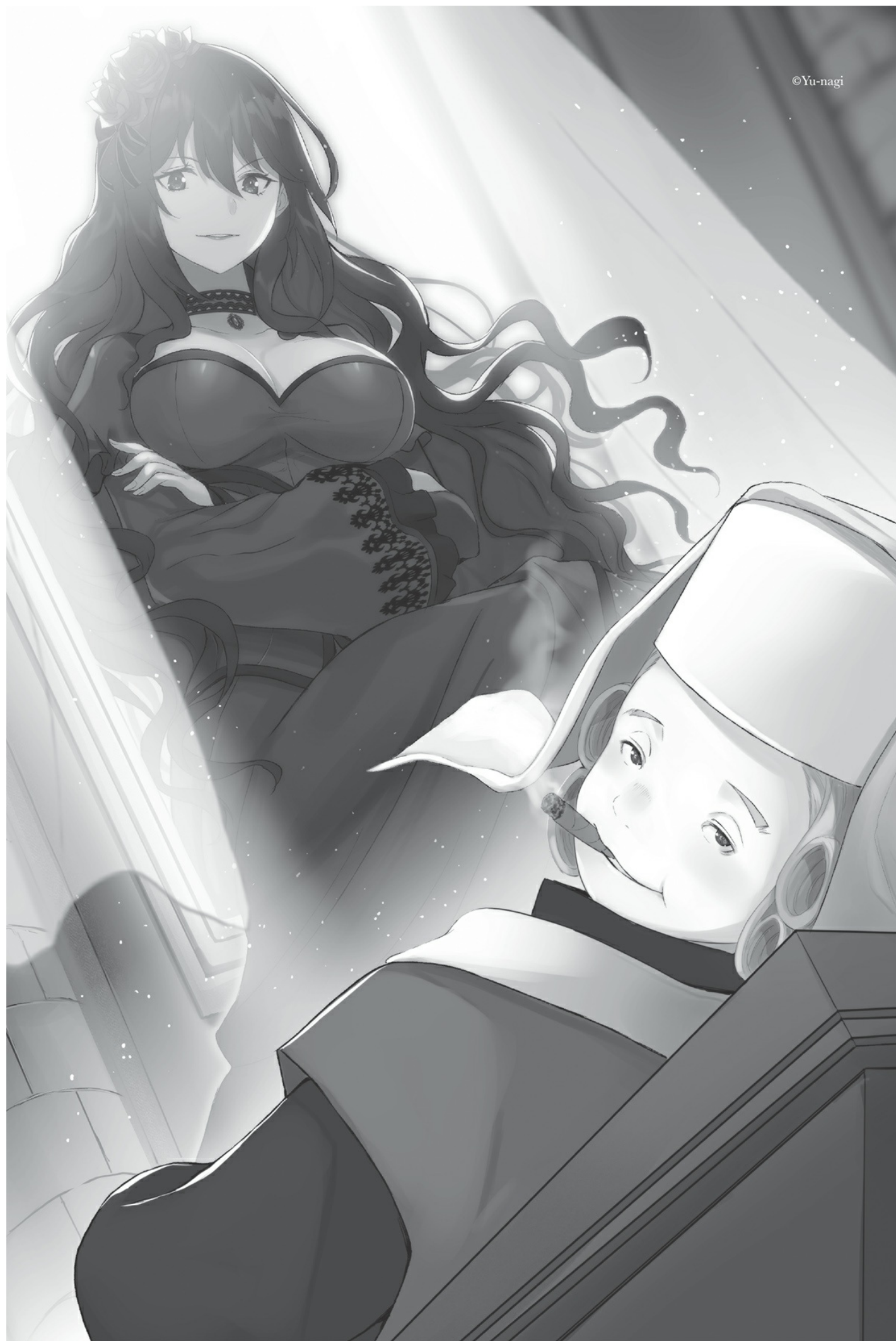
No one alive, that is.

“You can see me, can’t you? You could from the start—ever since we met at the Grand Merillian, you’ve been aware of my presence. If you weren’t, you never would have troubled yourself with dissolving the engagement of some insignificant girl you didn’t even know.”

Her voice, as clear and sweet as a bell, affected his body like poison.

“Did you know I have an excellent memory?” she asked.

Her skin was like porcelain, her lips like ripe fruit, her body the very image of glamour and seduction. He had always believed that if a goddess descended to earth, she would look like Scarlett.



“It’s taken ten years, but I’ve finally changed my mind. Please lend me your strength.”

Her amethyst eyes drew him in; their sparkle hadn’t dimmed in the slightest. A shiver ran down his spine, and he smiled at the rapture rising within him.



Kendall Levine contacted Theophilis as soon as his delegation returned to Faris from Adelbide.

Until now, Kendall hadn’t involved himself in the struggle over succession, instead maintaining a neutral stance. Theophilis agreed to a meeting out of curiosity.

“Kendall, it’s been a long time since I last saw you. Whatever is the matter?”

As the leader of the delegation, Kendall had been held responsible for the kidnapping of Ulysses and removed from his post. He was still supposed to be in disciplinary confinement.

“There’s something urgent I must tell you.”

“Now you’re worried about me? You’re only going to lose more hair, man.”

The strain must have been affecting Kendall, already a serious man, because he seemed to have lost a good deal of weight since Theophilis had seen him last. Tragically, his hairline had also receded even farther.

“Anyhow, what is it?”

“Before I get to that, what is Prince Roderick doing at the moment?”

“Hiding out in his cave as usual. I do believe this is a record for him.”

The cowardly second prince couldn’t seem to bring himself to give up his right to the throne, choosing instead to wait out the storm. Theophilis laughed scornfully, but his visitor merely narrowed his eyes and glanced warily around the room.

“I humbly regret to inform you that Prince Roderick is in league with Daeg Gallus.”

“Daeg Gallus?”

Theophilis frowned. If he remembered correctly, that was the name of a huge criminal organization with tentacles reaching across the continent. One theory had it that no war, conflict, or insurrection took place without their secret involvement. But...

“Don’t joke with me. I can’t imagine a coward like him having the guts to join that sort of organization.”

“His mother, Queen Anna, was the one who forged the original connection. She was extremely concerned about Roderick’s future. She most likely made some kind of agreement with them.”

That made sense. Such a scheme sounded very like that evil woman.

Kendall continued. “Members of the organization have a tattoo of the sun somewhere on their body.”

“A tattoo?”

Suddenly, Roderick remembered one of his aides. The man who had led the effort to imprison Alexandra and pushed for execution rather than exile. Didn’t he have a tattoo of a sun behind his right ear?

“Does that ring a bell?” Kendall must have noticed the way his face paled. He gazed at him, eyes searching.

Theophilis shook his head, trying to hide his agitation. “It’s hard to believe what you say. To begin with, if he took the throne, resistance from the conservatives would be unavoidable.”

Roderick’s mother, Anna, was the illegitimate child of an earl. His recluse brother had common blood in his veins. The sticklers who still insisted on pure bloodlines would never recognize a king with suspect lineage.

But this argument did nothing to soften Kendall’s expression.

“It wasn’t Adelbide that kidnapped Ulysses; it was Daeg Gallus. He may not be a direct descendent, but he has Cornelia Faris’s blood. Prince Ulysses would serve as a puppet king manipulated from the shadows by Prince Roderick. I believe that was the plot Anna envisioned.”

“I see. That does seem like her style.”

“Yes. You must take great care. With your other siblings out of the way, I hear he is plotting to put you in your grave.”

Theophilis snorted.

“I will be as careful as I can,” he said, looking down at the man with thinning gray hair and light brown eyes. “By the way, Kendall, wherever did you get that information?”

Kendall Levine maintained a neutral position, unaligned with any force. And he had been out of the country until very recently.

How might someone in another country get his hands on domestic secrets? It was a natural question to ask.

Theophilis was aware that Kendall stood behind Ulysses. The man was a commoner who had risen through the ranks, and he lacked supporters just like the young prince. What if Ulysses hadn’t really been kidnapped, but instead was being sheltered somewhere? If Kendall planted the seeds of doubt and turned Theophilis and Roderick against each other, the child would be secure.

Kendall’s eyes grew wide for a moment at Theophilis’s sharp tone. Then he smiled with amusement.

“From Alexandra,” he said.



“And?”

Hamsworth tilted his fleshy neck as inquisitively as he could.

“What would you like your humble servant to do?”

Hamsworth’s goddess broke into a stunning smile.

“I’d like you to search for a rat.”

And so, Dominic Hamsworth paid a visit to the palace.

When he arrived in his ceremonial robes and announced that he had come to pray at Crown Prince Enrique’s sickbed, the heavy gate easily swung open. But instead of heading for the Elbaite Detached Palace, where the prince was recuperating, he went to Moldavite Palace, the heart of the kingdom.

“Actually, I was supposed to receive some *charity* from His Highness Prince Enrique very soon.”

“Charity?”

Enrique’s younger brother Johan could not hide his suspicion. Johan was not the sort of man just anyone could meet with, but it was the duty of a ruler to listen to a priest’s sermons.

“Yes. You didn’t know? To receive the word of the gods, we need *coins* from devout individuals. Not simply invisible prayers, you see.”

In other words, Hamsworth claimed to have come asking for a contribution. The young prince, ruling in his father’s stead because of his brother’s illness, scowled uncomfortably. *What’s this?* Hamsworth silently wondered. He had heard that Johan was the one who’d consented to Constance Grail’s execution, and Hamsworth had assumed for that reason he must be a scheming scoundrel.

“I don’t think my brother would have approved of something like that. There must be a misunderstanding.”

Hamsworth observed Johan carefully. He wondered if the man looked haggard because he was worried about his brother or if something else was bothering him. He’d heard the second prince was a man of great integrity. If that was true, it was hard to imagine he would sentence a young girl to death without a trial.

That left two possibilities. Either his reputation was inaccurate, or someone had twisted his arm.

Speaking of which, Hamsworth had yet to see Johan’s wife or little daughter during his visit. He chose his next words carefully.

“It seems you are right. I’ve finished my prayers for Prince Enrique, so I’d better move on to my other stray sheep... Oh, but...”

“Yes?”

“Do you, by any chance, feel a need for the grace of the gods?”

“...I...”

For the first time, confusion crept across the prince’s stern face. Aha. But as

Hamsworth drew a deep breath in preparation for his next words, a new voice broke into the conversation.

“Pardon me. Am I interrupting something?”

He turned around to see a man standing in the doorway.

Hamsworth hadn't even sensed he was there. What's more, the man hadn't asked permission to enter the room. But far from reprimanding him for his lack of deference, Johan went pale at the sight of him.

“No, the priest was just leaving,” Johan said as if he and Hamsworth had been up to some underhanded business.

Sensing something unsettling, Hamsworth turned to the unfamiliar man.

“And you would be...”

“Rufus. Rufus May. I was recently appointed to the post of vice-comptroller-general.”

There was nothing whatsoever distinctive about the man.

He was of medium build and medium height, with a vaguely timid face. But if he was vice-comptroller-general, it would stand to reason he had leaped at the chance provided by Simon Darkian's death.

“Ah, so you're the new vice-comptroller-general. As you can see, I am a humble servant of the gods. Have I by chance had the honor of your presence in my church?”

“I'm sorry to say I haven't had the chance since my appointment. But I will be sure to pay a visit.”

“Please do keep it in mind. I believe it would be much to your advantage, in all sorts of ways.”

Hamsworth smiled broadly and stretched out his hand. Rufus May returned the gesture with his right hand, a placid smile on his face. Strangely, he was wearing white gloves indoors.

The instant their fingers touched, tiny sparks flew. Rufus withdrew his hand as if he'd been struck. When he pulled off his glove to see if he'd been burned,

Hamsworth let out a low laugh.

“Oh, forgive me. It must have been static electricity—or perhaps a goddess’s whimsy?”

“Do you not you feel pain?” his goddess asked dubiously in her beautiful voice as they left the palace. She must have been talking about the handshake.

“Of course I do. But any pain administered by you is supreme joy,” he answered matter-of-factly.

She looked down at him silently as if she were examining a dead insect.

Hamsworth coughed uncomfortably and switched to a more serious topic. “Did anything strike you as odd?”

“Isn’t a man who wears gloves in this heat practically asking to be suspected?”

“You’re right that it’s unusual, but my great-uncle, who was obsessed with cleanliness, used to wear silk gloves in summer...”

“Dear me, I think I just heard a pig squealing. I wonder if there’s a sty around here somewhere.”

“Oh no, it’s extremely suspicious to wear gloves in midsummer!” he exclaimed.

Scarlett smiled happily. She was so beautiful, she made the very air around her seem glamorous. As he gaped at her, bewitched, her cherry lips approached his ear. His heart thumped like a young man’s.

“*He had it,*” she said. Hamsworth’s eyes widened at her obvious amusement. “He had a sun tattoo on his wrist. He said his name was Rufus May, didn’t he?”

When Hamsworth looked up, a haughty smile was spread over his goddess’s lips.

“He’s the rat. Look into his background immediately.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

He placed his hand over his heart and bowed deeply. He heard Scarlett sighing above him.

“...I guess I can handle something of that level,” she said.

He peered into her amethyst eyes, unsure what she meant.

“Normally, if I do something strenuous like that, I get sleepy. This time, because I held back and only did it for a second, it didn’t seem to affect me.”

Hamsworth nodded.

“That makes sense.”

“...How would you know?”

“Because I am graced by the power of the goddesses.”

“You just see things other people don’t, right? What of it?”

“There are things I am privy to through my contact with such presences. For example, I know that causing a phenomenon like that consumes quite a lot of energy. It makes sense that you wouldn’t be able to maintain a physical form afterward.”

Wandering ghosts like Scarlett maintained their existence by absorbing life force from the regular world in some way—or so Hamsworth believed. They used that force to re-create the form they had while alive, move things around, make noises, and perform other ghostly acts.

That was the reason most people possessed by ghosts deteriorated over time. Day by day, their life force was being stolen. But Constance Grail did not appear to be growing weaker. Either she and Scarlett were very compatible, or Scarlett must have been able to draw her life force from things such as plants or the atmosphere. In Hamsworth’s experience, the more rational ghosts were often of that type—so-called guardian spirits.

And not all ghosts disappeared when they had used up their energy and could no longer maintain a form. The only thing that could truly remove them from this world was— Once his thoughts had reached that point, Hamsworth continued to speak.

“By the way, is your reason for remaining in this world to exact revenge?”

“Obviously.”

She glared at him as if she thought he was an idiot for even asking.

“I see. And you still feel that way?”

“What did you say?”

“Right now, at this moment, is your purpose to exact revenge? Or is it to rescue Constance Grail?”

For a moment, Scarlett was silent.

“...To exact revenge, obviously,” she finally spat out. “That idiotic girl’s mistakes are the reason I couldn’t get my revenge and had to come to you for help.”

“Is that so?” Hamsworth said, not contradicting her. In fact, her true aim didn’t matter.

“I believe that for a spirit that has lost its body to remain here, it must have some powerful feeling or goal. In other words, your desire for revenge is probably what is tying you to this world.”

Scarlett raised her eyebrows suspiciously. Even with that expression, she looked as angelic as a picture in the holy book.

“As soon as you feel your revenge is complete—you will return to the realm of the gods.”



“Damn it...!”

Mylene Reese squared her shoulders and swore in a very unladylike way. She had just been chased out of an old building in the sixth quarter of Saint Olivier Road. At this point, she couldn’t even count the number of publishers that had turned her away.

Needless to say, the article she was trying to sell was about Connie’s innocence. This time, she’d come to a popular magazine specializing in gossip, so she’d been sure they would show some interest.

“If only I wasn’t a nobleman’s daughter!”

She was staring up at the sky, at a loss for what to do, when she heard a

commotion in the street. She looked toward the sound and saw a girl standing there yelling at the top of her lungs.

Though she could only see her back, Mylene recognized the girl's boyishly short chestnut hair as it bounced lightly on her head.

"Please sign the petition against the execution! Constance Grail is innocent!"

The late afternoon street was bustling with people. Sadly, far from stopping in response to the girl's desperate plea, they sidestepped her as soon as they heard what she was saying. To commoners, the execution of a noble must have been nothing more than entertainment.

Nevertheless, the girl kept shouting.

"Please, please, listen to me—"

"Kate..."

Mylene couldn't help interrupting her friend, who turned around in surprise, then scowled.

"I went to the Violet Association, but..."

Her voice was shaking slightly.

"They told me things are different now than they were ten years ago, and they don't want to attract negative attention from the palace."

Still, Kate didn't cry. She glanced down for only a second before looking back up energetically as if to shake off her uncertainty. Her firm gaze focused on Mylene.

"But I won't give up, not ever."

Ahhh, Mylene thought. She's so strong. And look at me. A few rejections and I feel like the world has ended. How weak I am. She bit her lip, embarrassed by her own spinelessness.

"Well now, this is an ambitious effort," someone cut in, interrupting Mylene's thoughts. A plump, middle-aged woman was standing next to her. When Kate saw the woman, her face tensed slightly in distaste. Did they know each other?

The woman seemed to be injured, with her arm wrapped in a white sling. As

Mylene stared at her pityingly, the woman shrugged.

“I was playing with fire,” she said, “and my skills aren’t what they used to be.”

Mylene wondered what sort of fire she meant, but she wisely remained silent.

“Everyone insisted, so I was resting in bed like a good girl when I heard a cute young thing had come by. Of course, I simply had to leap out of bed and find you.”

“B-but they already turned me down...”

“Let me guess. It was someone on the Youth Committee who told you we couldn’t help.”

Kate blinked in surprise.

“Everything will be fine. Leave the rest to us,” she said. She spoke as if she had sole right to make decisions for the Violet Association.

“And you are...?” Mylene couldn’t help asking.

The woman turned to her.

“Oh, did I forget to introduce myself?” she asked.

Mylene nodded timidly, and the woman narrowed her eyes.

“I’m Kimberly Smith.”

Drop dead, old farts.

Walter Robinson clicked his tongue coarsely. With his arm wrapped around the back of his chair and his feet kicked up on his desk, he was the very picture of a ruffian. His secretary, whose bywords were *clean and proper*, would probably faint if she saw him right now.

Walter had spent the past several days running from one end of the capital to the other.

All for the sake of saving Constance Grail, of course.

Appearances to the contrary, Walter was a highly dutiful man, and he owed Constance Grail a bigger favor than he could ever return. After all, she had rescued his beloved Abigail. Walter believed in returning debts with interest.

Plus, Abigail herself had asked him to help. She probably would have preferred to do it herself, but at the moment, her full energies were focused on finding the missing Lucia.

Lucia's kidnappers were most likely members of Daeg Gallus. But they were always just beyond reach, and the search was going nowhere.

Drop dead, he spat again. Walter's own situation was just as difficult. He was surrounded by mountains of crates stuffed with petitions to stop the execution of Constance Grail. They weren't the ones her friends were even now out collecting, but rather ones that Viscount Grail himself had just delivered in person. It seemed the bearlike man preferred not to fight with his fists.

Walter deemed this a wise choice, but finding it slightly unusual, he had asked him about it. The reply was nonchalant: "It's our family motto," the viscount had said with a shrug.

Thou shalt be sincere.

As he thought over the famous phrase, something dawned on him.

Those of the Grail family were sincere. He couldn't deny that. It was clear enough from dealing with them in person. But in all likelihood, Percival Grail the First's reasons for choosing the motto *hadn't* been entirely sincere.

He'd probably realized that sincerity was both a weapon and a shield.

As if to prove this, once set, the flames of their cause had quickly become a wildfire. Right now, subjects young and old in the Grail domain had formed a political party and come up with a plan to protest in front of the palace. As one wrong step could land them in jail, Miss Kimberly had been put in charge of the energetic bunch.

So far, so good.

The problem now had to do with delivering the petitions.

The palace had refused to accept them. They said they couldn't trust an upstart trader raised in the slums. No matter how much money he heaped on them, how much he threatened them, or how much he begged, they wouldn't change their minds. At this rate, even if he forced them to take the petitions,

they would likely crumple them up and throw them away on the spot.

That was when he remembered the chancellor, Adolphus Castiel. His daughter had been executed, too, and he'd heard that Constance knew the chancellor through her former fiancé, Randolph Ulster. But when he pulled some strings to try and secure a meeting with him...

He learned that for some reason, Adolphus Castiel, who was rumored to be caring for the crown prince, had left the country.

"Where the hell could he be gadding about at a time like this?! The swine...!"

Just as he was on the verge of tearing his hair out, he heard an exasperated voice.

"If you'd joined the trade association as you should have, you wouldn't be in this situation."

Walter spun around. Standing before him was a handsome young man with a shaved head and a simple outfit of pants and a white shirt. Walter's eyes widened.

"...The Bronson boy?"

"It's Neil."

".....What's a sheltered brat like you doing bothering me at a busy time like this?"

"Revealing your true colors today, I see. By the way, your secretary showed me in without issue. I knocked on your door, too. You didn't hear, it seems," Neil said with a frustrated glare.

Walter cleared his throat.

"...And what sort of business does the young son of the Bronson Company have with me?"

He'd said something about a trade association. He must mean the Castle Town Trade Association. Even the name sounded prehistoric. As far as Walter was concerned, it was an exclusive group of powerless, inflexible little outfits with nothing more than their histories to recommend them—and the Bronson Company topped the list.

“It’s Neil. And it’s not so much business as information. The palace has agreed to accept the petitions.”

“...What?”

He didn’t understand.

“You were having a hard time of it, weren’t you?”

“Ah, um, well, but how...?”

“I’d thank you not to underestimate the association, although you seem to have a poor impression of us. As you know, we are companies of no account, but we’ve been around so long, you can practically see the rust on us. All of us have loans out to at least one or two nobles. So we all made *polite requests* of our acquaintances, and soon enough we heard the petitions would be accepted *gladly*.”

Damian Bronson was chair of the trade association. His son, Neil, was a candidate to succeed him, and it must have been easy for him to win the cooperation of the others. Walter understood that. But they weren’t helping out of charity. They were doing a favor for the hallowed Bronson Company, and one day they would ask for a favor in return, with interest.

Honestly speaking, the Bronson boy didn’t owe Walter that much. Walter frowned, unsure what had motivated him.

“Tell me this, boy.”

“It’s Neil.”

“I can’t imagine you’ll see a cent from any of this.”

“You’re right. But...”

Neil Bronson narrowed his eyes as if recalling something. Then he gave an irksomely handsome smile.

“If I were Constance Grail,” he continued, “I’d probably just smile and say, ‘And what of it?’”

Mylene clenched her fist and steeled her will.

Here I go.

Beneath the grand chandeliers, sly foxes decked out to the tips of their toes were dancing, smiles pasted on their faces. Mylene's job was to get their names on paper.

A few days earlier, Walter Robinson had told her he was preparing to deliver the petitions to the palace.

And that wasn't all. Right now, members of the Violet Association and young people from the Grail domain were protesting in the capital for Connie's release, with Kimberly Smith at their helm. Kate, who was more observant than her gentle appearance suggested, was serving as Kimberly's literal right-hand woman.

In the end, no publisher had agreed to run Mylene's article. Maybe someone was pressuring them. But the main reason, Mylene realized, was her own lack of experience. As frustrating as it was, she really was a sheltered nobleman's daughter. But she didn't have time to feel sorry for herself. She could write other articles in the future, but Connie was running out of time. Mylene's pride didn't matter anymore.

So she threw shame and rumors to the wind and decided to act boldly as the nobleman's daughter that she was. So far, most of the signatures on the petitions were from commoners. To spur the kingdom's rulers to action, they needed to add the names of every upper-class individual they could get.

And how did one convince nobles to gather in one place? As a noble herself, Mylene knew that much at least: You held a ball.

The Reese family was just as poor as the Grail family, but Viscount Hamsworth had appeared out of nowhere offering to cover the costs and arrange the guest list. It seemed, however, that he wouldn't be able to attend the ball himself. He was quite busy these days.

Mylene made her way to the podium set up to have a view of the entire ballroom and took a deep breath.

Then she recited her article, which she had stayed up all night memorizing, and explained just how dire her friend's situation was. She told the crowd that, to save Connie, she needed the help of all the sensible people gathered before her.

The buzz of voices fell silent, but the gazes turned toward the platform were anything but friendly. Mylene heard people whispering to each other. Some were frowning or snorting disdainfully.

The obviously contemptuous mood of the crowd turned Mylene's legs to jelly. She knew this was no time for cowardice, but she couldn't bring herself to continue speaking.

A chilly mood descended, as if the crowd were a pack of wild animals and Mylene their cornered prey. Then, to her surprise, an affected sigh rang out.

"Oh, how boring," a thin, attractive woman said. All eyes turned from Mylene to her.

"Countess Emanuel...?"

It was the eccentric earl's wife who had always been friendly with Connie.

"I just adore being entertained," she said.

Unfortunately, her delicately beautiful face was twisted into an expression of utter boredom.

"But this is no laughing matter."

Mylene stiffened under her icy gaze. *So I've failed again. Mylene Reese can't get anything right. I'll never be able to look Connie in the eyes after this.* As she bit her lip and stared at the floor, she heard the clicking of high heels. The sound drew closer and closer, until it stopped just before the platform.

Mylene looked up.

The Countess Emanuel was standing directly in front of her, her back as straight as a rod. As she stared at Mylene, who was blinking in surprise, her lips suddenly curled upward. Then she lifted her skirt as elegantly as if she were dancing a waltz and spun back toward the noisy crowd.

Her pale eyes bore down haughtily on those gathered before her.

"I think you all realize what's going on. Just like you did *ten years ago*."

Mylene heard a gasp. Or rather, a lot of gasps.

"You say Constance kidnapped someone? That she hurt someone rather than

helping them? If that's a joke, it's in awfully bad taste. Did you forget what blood runs in her veins? Did you forget about the ridiculous family she comes from, a family that has been standing firm since this kingdom was formed?"

Her tone was neither accusatory nor mocking, but instead terribly calm.

"Constance is a sincere Grail."

Suddenly, she burst out laughing. She grabbed the pen from Mylene's hand and fluidly signed her name on the paper lying on the podium.

"Th-thank you very much!" Mylene squeaked out.

The countess waved her hand like it was nothing before striding off as jauntily as she had come.

As Mylene was watching her in a daze, someone came up behind her and asked crossly, "Where do I sign my name?"

She turned around. It was Emilia Godwin.

"...Lady Godwin?"

Mylene was fairly sure Emilia had been in Scarlett's clique before she was executed. Mylene gaped in surprise, and Emilia blushed.

"I mean, what else can I do?" she shouted loudly enough for the whole room to hear. "I had a dream about Scarlett! And what do you think that devil woman said as she stood by my pillow?! She looked at me like I was less than human, just as she always did, and said, 'Do you think I'll let a mere viscount's daughter reenact the death of Scarlett Castiel?!' Just look at these goose pimples!"

She looked extremely displeased with the situation.

"I'll die before letting the vengeful ghost of Scarlett Castiel possess me!"

Those words seemed to be the clincher.

Pale as ghosts themselves, the guests pushed and shoved to form a line in front of Mylene and sign the petitions, as if they were some kind of talisman against possession.

By then, public opinion had turned clearly in the Grail family's favor.

And then, unexpected backup arrived from overseas.

A book from a small publisher in the Republic of Soldita was suddenly flying off the shelves so fast, they had to print a second run. When Walter Robinson heard what was happening, he started importing the books into Adelbide.

At first glance, the book seemed to be a white-knuckle suspense story about a conspiracy in an imaginary kingdom. But it was rumored to be based on reality. After all, the main character overcame her lowly position as a viscount's daughter to marry the crown prince. There was only one place that had happened.

The novel suggested that the clever princess whom everyone called a saint was actually a member of a sprawling criminal organization.

No sooner had Mylene picked up a copy of the book, which had the amusing title *The Truth About True Love*, than she realized she'd been beaten to the punch. After all, the author's name was...

"...Adams Hicks," she mumbled.

Kate gave her a puzzled look.

"Do you know him?"

"Oh, no. But his initials are A.H. The same as Anthony Hardy."

"Anthony Hardy?"

"That woman's pen name. She clearly hasn't learned her lesson."

"What woman are you talking about...?!"

Mylene thought about that twisted redhead who could turn anything to her benefit.

"Amelia Hobbes," she muttered sullenly.

Cecilia clicked her tongue.

Who could have imagined things would turn out like this?

First came the campaign for Constance Grail's release led by Kimberly Smith, and then the mountain of petitions carted into the palace despite her strict orders not to accept them under any circumstances. She considered throwing them all away, but with so many of the signatures coming from nobles, she

couldn't very well do that. The finishing touch had been that blasted redhead. At this very moment, people from every corner of the kingdom were casting their suspicious gazes on her.

And all on account of that ordinary little viscount's daughter!

She thought of her hazelnut hair and pale green eyes. You could find girls like her anywhere, with nothing whatsoever to distinguish them. So why was everyone and their brother suddenly trying to rescue her? Cecilia couldn't make sense of it.

The man standing in front of her couldn't, either, it seemed.

For once, the ever calm and collected Krishna seemed unable to hide his irritation.

"No matter what anyone says, the execution must take place. Once they see the girl's head roll, the rabble rousers ought to quiet down. Oh—and before that, we've got to get rid of the adopted girl from the O'Brian house."

Cecilia's face tensed. She quickly regained her composure, but Krishna was too sharp-eyed to miss her reaction.

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking what a pain it will be to dispose of the body. Can I ask the reason?" she said casually.

Krishna let out a low laugh.

"Because we don't need her alive, of course. Don't worry about Salvador. We should have killed her right away. You see what happened when you let Amelia Hobbes go? It's bad enough to have Abigail O'Brian and her hound sniffing around. In this heat, too. It's disgusting. Don't you think they would enjoy having her tattered little corpse sent to them as a present?"

So it's just your personal grudge, Cecilia thought, but said nothing. Krishna must have taken her silence for agreement, because he continued in a slightly calmer tone.

"This situation really is unpleasant. And now these stupid rumors..."

"Rumors?"

“You didn’t hear? Apparently, Constance Grail can communicate with the dead, and she’s trying to prove that Scarlett Castiel was killed for a crime she didn’t commit.”

Cecilia raised her eyebrows slightly.

“...Communicate with the dead?”

When Cecilia opened the door to the cell, its petite occupant was performing sit-ups on the bed. But before she could reach ten, she fell back, exhausted.

“You look surprisingly well,” Cecilia remarked.

Constance shot upright.

“Crown Princess Cecilia...?!”

Cecilia smiled, a conditioned response to hearing her name.

“Yes. I’ve heard you can speak with the dead. Is it true?”

Constance’s gaze darted around uneasily. “Well...”

“Liar.”

The girl looked slightly taken aback by Cecilia’s harsh tone.

“The dead don’t talk. They don’t think. They just turn to ash.”

That was the obvious truth. At least, it was for Cecilia.

After all, if you could hear the dead—

A cold smile suddenly spread over her lips. She knew it must look twisted.

Constance Grail was staring at her. After a moment, the girl asked quietly, “And you?”

Those frank green eyes were fixed on her. The color reminded Cecilia of fresh spring grass.

“Whose voice do you want to hear?”

[List of Current Characters]



**Constance
Grail**

Sixteen-year-old who's been benched right at the most decisive moment in the game. Nevertheless, attempting to maintain her presence as the main character by gathering energy from those around her like she's forming a Spirit Bomb.



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old currently on the lam. Typically starts any project by finding a servant, but has never had a pig for a servant before and isn't sure how to use him other than as an emergency food source. ←new!

Percival Ethel Grail

Arrived on the scene with a lot of unnecessary fanfare, only to disappear without helping.



Krishna

Self-styled "capable guy" who screws up a lot for someone seemingly so powerful. Salvador, for one, has noticed this but has decided to leave the man alone since he tends to fly off the handle when his mistakes are pointed out.

Theophilis Faris

Tried to show off his abilities despite being a decoy, but is ultimately just a decoy. Appears doomed to die.



**Viscount
Hamsworth**

Has been upgraded from a pig who couldn't fly to a pig who can see it all. ←new!

Connie's Dear Friends

Can't be named individually owing to a lack of space on the page, but basically, all the people trying to save Connie. I swear it's not that I'm just too lazy to list them all.

The child was universally known as a thief.

Spacious cloth tents fluttered in the wind, adding spots of color to the clear blue sky high overhead. In the shade of the tents, vegetables and spices, fabric, and everyday goods were crowded in rows on geometrically patterned carpets spread over the ground. The child was running nimbly through the narrow streets of the bazaar, a burlap bag slung over one shoulder. Although already afternoon, the market was still lively. Slipping nimbly through the crowd, the child rounded a corner and ran smack into a man.

“Watch where you’re going, kid!” the man shouted.

The child nodded slightly but kept running.

After a few minutes, a fruit seller’s stall came into view. Melons picked that morning at dawn were floating in barrels of water together with slices of lemon.

A young girl was inspecting the fruit. Even from a distance, the child recognized the girl’s even features and gave a slight smile. The muscular shopkeeper was talking to the girl, a self-satisfied smirk on his face, when the child walked right up to him and kicked him in the rear.

“Leave Cess alone, old man!”

But there was hardly any force in the child’s leg, and it was really only a playful kick. Knowing this, the shopkeeper merely fixed the child with a mischievous wink.

“So the little knight has finally come to get you, has he? Still as short as ever, I see.”

“Shut up. I’ll be big one day. You better be ready, ’cause I’ll be looking down my nose at you soon!”

The shopkeeper roared with laughter, holding his belly and wiping his eyes. The child sulked.

“Cici!” the girl cried, throwing her arms out in an embrace. “How I’ve missed

you!”

“You have? It’s only been a few days.”

Two days ago, old Mother Natalie had asked Cici to fetch an ointment for her sore back from a pharmacist she frequented in the center of town. Cici had been there and back many times before, but each time, Cess was overjoyed at their reunion, causing Cici to clam up from embarrassment.

Seeing Cici fidget absently with a coin pouch, Cess raised her eyebrows.

“Where’d you get that?”

Damn it, Cici swore silently. Cess must have noticed it was a different pouch than usual. It was obviously full of copper coins—and in this market near the slum, copper and gold coins were a rare sight. Since Cici hadn’t been working that day, it was only natural for Cess to be suspicious.

“Um...”

Cici glanced around nervously but couldn’t think of a good excuse.

“...I found it.”

Predictably, a heavy silence descended. An intimidating smile spread over Cess’s pretty face as she stepped closer.

“Where did you get it?”

“Nowhere, I mean, when I bumped into that man, I just...”

“You just?”

“My hand just...filched some things,” Cici whispered, glancing around uneasily.

Cess frowned. “Return it this second!”

“What?! Why?!”

“Stealing is a crime!”

“It’s the dupe’s own fault for letting me do it!”

“No, it’s your fault for stealing!”

Cici winced at the force of her argument, copied straight from Mother

Natalie.

“As long as I’m alive, I won’t let you behave that way. I want you to be able to hold your head high!”

“Don’t treat me like a ch-child!”

“But I’m older than you!”

“You were abandoned at the orphanage just a month before I was!”

“I’ll listen to your complaints once you’re taller than me.”

She snorted triumphantly, and Cici slouched. Just as expected, there was no winning a debate against Cess.

Cici followed Cess down the street with heavy feet, still thinking there was no reason to return the pouch if the man didn’t notice it was missing, but unfortunately, they soon saw him searching desperately for something in front of a bulk incense shop.

“Hey, you, old man!”

The middle-aged man looked up at Cici, but he didn’t shout “Thief!” They had only collided for an instant. He might have noticed the perpetrator was a child, but beyond that, he probably didn’t remember much.

“I picked this up near here. Is this what you’re looking for?”

Cici held out the pouch. The man looked up in surprise. Then he grunted incoherently and nodded. He looked ready to cry.

“Thank you. There’s a memento of my wife in this pouch.”

“That so?” Cici answered curtly, watching with mixed feelings as the man walked away, turning back every few steps to repeat his thanks. Cici heard someone clapping. Of course it was Cess.

“Good job!”

“I didn’t exactly do anything praiseworthy, you know,” Cici snapped back, suddenly serious. Cess had been right earlier when she called it a crime.

“But even if you make a mistake, you’re able to do the right thing in the end. That’s a wonderful quality, you know. I knew you would do it!”

Cess smiled broadly and ruffled Cici's hair. She was using a lot of force.

"Hey, stop it, you're gonna snap my neck!"

"You're embarrassed, aren't you? How cute!"

"Am not!"

When they got back to the orphanage, exhausted, little Lia ran up to them.

"Cici, Cess, you're back!"

"Hey, I'm back! Anything happen while I was gone?" Cici asked, ruffling the child's soft, chestnut hair. The question was Cici's customary greeting, but this time, Lia tilted her head slightly and said, "Uh-huh!"

"A strange person came!"

"A strange person?"

"Uh-huh, really strange. He said he was looking for a girl named Cecilia who's turning twelve this year."

Cici frowned. It sounded like someone's parents were feeling guilty about giving up their kid and wanted her back.

"That's a tall order. No one at the orphanage knows exactly when they were born, and I bet half the girls in this town are named Cecilia. The master of the domain's daughter, too."

According to legend, Cecilia was the name of a nun who had brought good fortune to the once-barren Luze domain. Lots of people named their daughters after her in hopes of being blessed with her grace.

"We've got lots of Cecílias here, too," Cess said. She was one of them, and so was easygoing little Lia. Since it was hard to tell all the Cecílias apart, they were given different nicknames.

"And what happened to this strange person?"

"He's still here."

Lia pointed over Cici's shoulder.

"He is?"

Cici turned around. A surprisingly well-dressed man was standing in the doorway, talking with Cess. Cici's face tensed.



“That little girl called you Cess just now, didn’t she? Does that mean your name is Cecilia?” the man asked.

“Y-yes.”

“And your eyes—I guess they’re close enough to rose-colored.”

“Yes...?”

Who did he think he was, acting so familiar with Cess? Cici took a step toward the man.

“Hey, you—”

But before Cici could say anything more, the man had turned to Mother Natalie.

“Sister, I’d like to talk with this girl,” he said, and without waiting for an answer, pulled Cess into a guest room. It happened too fast for Cici to stop him.

Cici didn’t know what the man said to Cess in that room.

But by the time he was done, Cess had made up her mind to leave the orphanage.

“...Cici, wake up.”

It was the night before Cess was to leave. Cici woke in the pallet crowded with other children to a rough shaking sensation.

“Mm... Cess?” Cici whispered sleepily.

Cess brought a finger to her lips. “Shh. Can you come outside?”

They slipped out to an embankment behind the orphanage and lay down side by side.

A breeze from the river rustled the grass, carrying its green smell to their noses. Somewhere, an insect was calling, its cry like a bell. Although it was night, they could still see shadows, and the moon shone brilliantly overhead.

Cess started talking in fits and starts. She said the lord of the domain’s daughter had always been a weak child and was not expected to live much longer.

“He said that I was going to become Miss Cecilia.”

It seemed that the Viscount Luze had long frequented a certain prostitute. Unbeknownst to him, she had become pregnant and had a baby. What happened after that wasn't clear, but in the end, the child was handed over to the orphanage. She had already been given a name, however, and at the prostitute's request, the owner of the brothel, who could write, had that name embroidered on a blanket for her.

Was it mere coincidence that the baby was named Cecilia, just like the viscount's legitimate daughter? The prostitute had already passed away, and it would likely remain a mystery forever.

“But, Cess, what if he's wrong and it isn't you?”

It would be one thing if the child had some distinguishing feature. But there must have been dozens of twelve-year-old orphan girls in this town named Cecilia.

“If those are the only things he can use to identify her—”

Cess interrupted with unusual force. “I don't think it matters if I'm really the viscount's daughter or not. It's more about being right for the job. And he happened to choose me.”

“But you don't have to go along with it, right?”

“It's more than I ever could have hoped for,” she said with a smile, looking older than her years.

Cess was still a child, but when she smiled, she was breathtakingly pretty. That probably had something to do with why she was chosen.

Cici understood what she was saying, but that didn't make it okay. Somehow, it felt like a betrayal.

“...You think you're up to playing a nobleman's daughter?” Cici snapped bitterly. “You said it's more than you could've hoped for... I didn't realize you wanted to be a princess that badly.”

“No, it's much better than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“He said he’d support the orphanage.”

Cici’s face went blank.

“If I do a good job standing in for the viscount’s daughter, he said he’d make sure the children here receive an education. I mean, if everyone was as clever as you, I’m sure they could make it out in the world. But you know some of them need a little help. I think if they could read at least, more of them could find their way.”

“...But what will make *you* happy? That’s what matters most.”

“All of you being happy, of course,” she said decisively, without a hint of regret.

Cici let out a loud sigh, then brushed away some dirt and stood up. “I guess there’s nothing I can do to stop you. But if anything bad happens, tell me. I might not look it, but I’m strong and I can think on my feet.”

“But you’re awfully small.”

“Shut up.”

Cici scowled at the older girl and her unnecessary jokes. Cess stuck out her tongue in reply, unrepentant.

“Listen, Cess. I—” Cici began, then thought better of it, glanced up with a smile, and started over. “All of us, we’ll only be happy if you are, okay?”

Cess blinked in surprise, then her face broke out in a bashful smile.

We were all going to find happiness together.

That’s the promise we made.

What’s going on?

Cici walked through the flames with a pounding heart.

“Mother Natalie!”

She—the woman who had raised them all—didn’t answer, nor did anyone else. Cici could hear only the crackle and roar of flames.

Why, why is this happening?

Earlier that day, Cici had gone to the neighboring town on an errand. By the time it was finished, the sun had set. Mother Natalie hadn't provided enough money to stay overnight like she usually did, so Cici had decided to head back that same night.

Back at the orphanage, the moon was already beginning its descent, and fire was licking up the walls of the building.

Cici dove in without a moment's hesitation. Red flames were spreading everywhere. Even keeping to areas where the fire was weakest brought blazing gusts of painful wind, scorching Cici's throat.

"Lia! Pete! Chris! Jesse...!"

Please, somebody, answer me! I'm begging you!

"Damn it...!"

As Cici headed toward the dining hall, a ball of flames fell from the ceiling. The fire was spreading fast in this area, and the heat was overwhelming. Still, Cici walked on.

"Cici...!" a voice suddenly screamed.

Familiar arms reached out.

"Cess...?"

"Oh, I'm so glad...! You're alive...!" a girl's voice cried tearfully.

Cess should have been at the viscount's residence, and yet here she was. She looked wretched, not at all like a nobleman's daughter. Her cheeks were sooty, her arms were burnt, and her fancy dress was all torn up. She was covered with what looked like blood.

Cici stepped back from her embrace.

"You're hurt!"

Cess stiffened, then shook her head listlessly. Although she was acting strangely, Cici didn't press her, relieved that at least the blood was not hers.

"What in the world is happening...?"

"It's my fault. I was such a fool."

Cess clenched her teeth and moaned.

“The viscount never intended to leave anyone alive who knew I was taking his daughter’s place. If only I had realized sooner...!”

“It’s not your fault,” Cici said, patting her back soothingly. Her shoulders trembled.

Suddenly, voices erupted from the stairwell leading to the second floor.

“I think I saw a shadow move! Did we miss someone?!”

Footsteps pounded toward the voice from several directions. Knife blades glinted.

What’s happening?

There were men with weapons, and Cess’s dress was covered with blood.

Cess had said *she* wasn’t hurt. Then whose blood was this?

Why had no one answered Cici’s calls?

“...Cess?”

What did she say when she saw me?

I’m so glad...! You’re alive...!

The way she’d said it, it was almost like everyone other than Cici was— “What happened to the others?”

Cess gulped. Her dusky red-brown eyes were peeled wide in shock, and her lips trembled. She bit her lip and shook her head, on the verge of tears.

“I didn’t make it in time.”

“Is anyone else...”

“No. They’ve killed them all. Mother Natalie, Lia, everyone. Yours was the only body I couldn’t find.”

Sparks of anger blotted out Cici’s vision. What had they done?

Digging nails into clenched palms brought some clarity of mind. This was no time to thrash out in anger.

“We have to get out of here before they come,” Cici said in a low voice.

Grabbing Cess’s slender wrist, Cici ran to the door leading out to the courtyard. But for some reason, Cess would go no farther. Thinking she must be hurt, Cici glanced back at her, only to be shoved forward alone into the courtyard, where she stumbled to the ground.

“Cess?!”

“I’m too slow.”

Cici frowned. Cess’s words didn’t make sense.

“You’re so fast, Cici. Run and get help.”

But that was impossible.

“Go, hurry! If they see you, they’ll follow you to the ends of the earth. Go.”

Her voice sounded strained. She must have been trying to play decoy. At the sudden realization, Cici leaped up. She must have been crazy to think her dearest friend would go on without her. They would go together, or not at all. Cici reached out to her, but that same instant, flames engulfed the pillar between them, sending it toppling over with a groan.

She was out of reach.

“Go!”

That frantic word was the last thing Cici heard her say.

Footsteps pounded down the stairs.

Go.

Cici took off running like a shot, crying hot tears. *Hurry. Hurry. If I don’t hurry...* But— By the time the squadron of military police arrived with Cici at their side, the sea of fire had spread. Red flames scorched the night sky. Each time the fire popped, a shower of tiny stars exploded.

Cici stood in front of the blazing orphanage and wailed to the heavens.

I must have cried until I fainted.

Sunlight stabbed painfully at Cici’s eyelids.

That night, we lay side by side in the grass on this same embankment, Cess and I.

Had everything been a dream? Lying in a haze of blurred memories, Cici heard voices nearby.

“I never imagined the pawn I searched high and low for would fall so easily.”

The sarcastic laughter belonged to the young man who had visited the orphanage two weeks earlier.

“Orders were, don’t leave anyone alive. Who could’ve known someone who should’ve been at the mansion would be at the orphanage?” The voice that answered sounded young. It hadn’t even broken yet. But despite its careless tone, the words were biting. “They probably didn’t even know what she looked like.”

“I think you knew what Cecilia looked like, Salvador.”

“I wasn’t even there yesterday,” the boy said in a weirdly cheerful voice. “That idiot viscount decided everything, and his protégés carried it out.”

The man sighed like he was suppressing a headache.

“What is that fool thinking? I arranged everything so the pawn would cooperate of her own free will, and look what he’s done.”

“He probably thought he could get his way through violence. That sort of noble doesn’t give a damn about the lives of commoners.”

“Anything to protect his own interests, I suppose?”

It seemed clear to Cici they were talking about the lord of the domain.

So it was Viscount Luze.

The truth seared itself into Cici’s mind.

That man murdered Cess. Mother Natalie. Lia. My little brothers and sisters.

An inferno of black flames swirled in Cici’s stomach.

Suddenly, leaves crunched underfoot, and a shadow fell over Cici’s head.

“Well, well, a survivor. What’s your name?”

Cici's heart felt strangely calm.

I never intended to hide. If they're going to kill me, they may as well do it quickly.

That way at least I'll be with everyone else.

Still lying sprawled on the ground, Cici hoarsely whispered an answer.

"Cici."

The man's eyes narrowed as he inspected his find.

"—Oh, you're a girl."

He didn't sound surprised, but Cici was caught off guard. Although she had never claimed to be a boy, everyone assumed she was from her way of speaking and style of dress. Hardly anyone outside the orphanage realized she was a girl.

"So you must be another Cecilia."

She felt her heart shredded once again at the sound of the old, familiar name. Cess. Cici. Lia. All were nicknames for Cecilia.

The man grabbed her chin roughly and turned her face toward him.

"And what nice rose-colored eyes you have. The special shade unique to the Luze family. It seems I missed it, thinking you were a boy. That child did seem to be hiding something. I guess it was you."

Cici felt as if she'd just been hit in the head with a hammer. Was the man saying she had the Luze family eyes? She remembered what he'd said to Cess the first time he came to the orphanage. *And your eyes—I guess they're close enough to rose-colored.* They must have explained it to her before they took her to the mansion.

They were looking for a twelve-year-old girl named Cecilia with unusual rose-colored eyes.

There was no way someone as smart as Cess wouldn't have realized the person they were searching for was Cici.

Cess! Cici moaned inwardly.

She had been trying to protect Cici from the start.

She could stand it no longer. She crumpled to the ground, her knees pressed to her chest. She couldn't breathe. Sadness crashed over her. Something black, like anger but far more hideous, was eating through her stomach.

The man looked at her with interest as Cici exhaled a shaking breath.

"Do you hate the viscount? Shall I let you take your revenge?"

"Revenge?"

"If you do as I tell you, you'll have the chance to torment him as much as you please. We'll have to keep him alive for a little while, but once his job is complete, he'll be your plaything."

He must mean she was to take over Cess's job.

"...You must be joking," she spat out, turning away.

She didn't know how these two were related to the viscount, but if they—if this man—hadn't taken Cess away— "Oh? Then what do you intend to do?" the man asked with a snort.

"Ouch!"

He mercilessly grabbed her bangs and yanked her face up again, peering down at her with amusement. His irises were bluish-silver, and she noticed he had two black dots next to his pupil.

"You aren't planning to get revenge on your own, are you? A powerless child who can hardly even feed herself could never take on the lord of the domain."

Cici stared at him wide-eyed. He was right. She had no one to turn to and no home. She had nothing. The orphanage and the people she cared about more than anything in the world had been burned up, leaving only a pile of ashes.

"True, killing the viscount won't bring your family back," the man continued, suppressing a smile. "But if you die like a dog, what good does that do? You'll turn to ash just like them, poor thing. None of you will rest in peace."

Their faces—those of Cess and Mother Natalie and all the others—flickered through her mind.

“Wouldn’t it be better to teach him a lesson?”

His words were like kindling to the dark flames in her heart. In an instant, they had consumed her entire body.

“You should follow your heart. You hate him, don’t you? If you can’t forgive him, why not destroy him—*him and this whole kingdom?*” the man whispered devilishly.

Cici heard a faint voice.

As long as I’m alive, I won’t let you behave that way. I want you to be able to hold your head high!

Flames engulfed the image of that brilliant smile, and the voice faded slowly until Cici could no longer hear it.

“Have you made up your mind?”

Instead of answering, she sneered and grabbed his outstretched hand.

The night before, when she had stretched out *her* hand, it hadn’t reached Cess.

Cici stood up slowly, as if to shake off the pain that was tearing her apart.

Whose voice do you want to hear?

Cecilia stood at the window of her bedroom, looking down at the castle district as the sun set.

She wondered why she hadn’t been able to answer the question. She should have told Constance Grail then and there. She knew the answer well enough.

No one’s voice.

She didn’t want to hear the voice of anyone who had left her behind, least of all *her* voice.

After all, she knew how furious they would be with her.



Cess

Orphan whose real name was Cecilia. Appeared delicate but did a lot of crazy things. Loved by everyone for her infallibly cheerful personality and universal kindness. Doted on Cici like her real little sister. Hopelessly clumsy and bad at sports.



Cici

Orphan whose real name is Cecilia. Often mistaken for a boy because of her rough speech and masculine clothing, but is in fact a girl. Loved by the younger kids for her caring nature and the way she's good at everything she tries. Adored Cess like her real big sister. Eventually turned to the dark side.

Salvador

Now very obvious he's never had any desire to exert himself.

Krishna

Now very obvious he's always screwed up a lot.

Kyle Hughes scrunched his handsome face into a scowl and clicked his tongue. He'd just caught sight of Randolph, who was sitting at a desk piled high with documents, completely absorbed in his work.

"Take a break already."

Randolph ignored him. His bloodshot eyes continued to skim the pages. Kyle could see dark circles under those eyes.

"You aren't even sleeping, are you?"

He suspected Randolph hadn't gotten a solid eight hours since his fiancée was sentenced to death.

Randolph wasn't the only one worried about Constance. Countless people were standing up in her defense—among them Kate Lorraine, Mylene Reese, Viscount Grail, and the subjects of the Grail domain. Not to mention her former fiancé and a certain king of the shipping business.

Their efforts were paying off; the winds were starting to shift. But Randolph was the one working behind the scenes with Kimberly Smith to forcibly remove any obstacles in their path. All while pursuing Daeg Gallus, of course. Kyle understood painfully well how much Randolph wanted to save his fiancée, but even Kyle, an admitted workaholic, was starting to worry about how much the man had on his plate.

He sighed, eliciting a level response from Randolph.

"It's not a problem."

"I disagree. You won't be doing anyone any good if you break down."

"We have no time to spare. The execution is days away."

"All the more reason for you to save your strength. If the current strategy fails, you might have to whisk our dear Connie off to a foreign land. I'll help you break her out of jail."

He'd meant it as a joke, but Randolph remained strangely silent. Kyle's lip twitched.

"Whoa, hold on a second. Don't tell me you've been preparing for that, too...!"

Kyle brought a hand to his head. He'd suddenly developed a pounding headache. Randolph gave him an innocent look.

"What are you talking about?"

"...You heartless brute."

His reproachful glare had no apparent effect. Kyle sighed loudly once again.

"Listen, I still consider you a close friend," he said, wagging his finger in the air. Randolph finally looked up from the pile of papers.

"What a coincidence."

"Hmm?"

Randolph's face was as blank as ever, but he seemed a little less tense than before.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Really."

"That's why I'm not telling you anything else. If I did, you'd probably do everything you could to help me," Randolph said without a trace of embarrassment.

Kyle flinched.

"...You're awfully sure of yourself," he snapped, too flustered to come up with anything better.

"Sure of myself?" Randolph echoed, giving him a puzzled look. "No, I'm just speaking the truth."

Kyle could tell from his tone that he wasn't joking or being sarcastic. Those were his genuine feelings.

"You...scam artist...!" Kyle groaned, scratching his head. Just then, his

assistant, Talbott, approached timidly.

“What is it?” he snapped, glaring reflexively.

“Ah, I’m sorry...!” the man answered instantly, apparently terrified by Kyle’s expression. It seemed a visitor had arrived. Kyle looked at Randolph. A head poked through the doorway, followed by a waving hand.

“Were you in the middle of something?”

“No, it’s fine,” Randolph said, standing up and pulling over a chair.

“Would you rather I leave?” Kyle asked.

The blond-haired visitor looked at him with oddly bright eyes.

“You’re Lieutenant Commander Ulster’s right-hand man, aren’t you? You can stay,” she said.

She had willful eyebrows and a large mouth. She was wearing men’s clothing, and her hair was pulled back messily. Her face was too wild to call beautiful, but Kyle found her attractive enough. He remembered mention of someone with her description in the file. San was her name, if he wasn’t mistaken. She belonged to Princess Alexandra’s camp in Faris and went around with a woman named Eularia. He knew they had met with Kendall Levine several times, but Kendall had already left the kingdom. Most likely, they had remained in Adelbide to search for Ulysses Faris, the half brother Alexandra doted on.

“And what can I do for you?” Randolph asked.

San frowned, distorting her clean, powderless face.

“It’s a little complicated. I don’t know quite where to begin...,” she said, staring up at the ceiling before mumbling crossly, “Eularia’s so much better at this sort of thing.”

“Then shall we call for her?” Randolph asked.

“Can’t do that,” San answered. “She’s serving as carrier pigeon right now.”

“A carrier pigeon...?” Kyle asked, completely lost.

“Does it have to do with your secret meeting with the king?” Randolph asked.

“Huh?” Kyle blurted out idiotically. San raised one eyebrow in amusement.

“Me? Meet with King Ernst?”

“Yes. The day before he left for Melvina. The official records say he met with Kendall Levine, but Kendall wasn’t at the palace that day.”

“How do you know that?”

“I had him followed. I believe Kendall was meeting with Eularia in the castle district. They shook off our man eventually, but he said you weren’t there. Which means you were probably meeting with the king in Kendall’s place. As a proxy for the third princess, I’d venture. I can’t say for certain, but my guess is you were talking with him about her imprisonment. As evidence, immediately after you met with the king, Kendall took off for Faris like he had urgent business there.”

“If you know that much already, it’ll be easy to tell you the rest,” San said with a grin. “Alexandra is against going to war. And she detests roosters. Don’t you think it would suit Adelbide’s interests if she took the throne?”

Kyle scratched his head, irritated by how presumptuous she was being.

“What are you saying? That we’ll be rewarded if your mistress becomes queen, so we ought to help you? That’s pretty brazen of you.”

San gave him a confused look.

“I’m just suggesting you make an investment in the future. I don’t think it’s such a bad proposition.”

“But the third princess doesn’t have much of that royal blood you all care so much about, and not much support in high places, either. Plus, she’s locked up right now. I could see your point if she had some kind of trump card up her sleeve, but as it is, her chances are slim to none.”

“That’s what King Ernst said,” San replied with a casual shrug.

Figures, Kyle thought.

“But he believed you,” Randolph interrupted in a low voice. “I’m right, aren’t I? I don’t know what magic you used, but the king believed you. That’s why no one’s seen Duke Castiel lately. I know that man, and there’s no way he would sit by and watch a situation like this unfold. But he’s stayed in the background,

insisting he was caring for Enrique. I was suspicious from the start, but now it all makes sense.”

Randolph turned his cerulean eyes toward San.

“It wasn’t the king who went to Melvina, was it? It was Duke Castiel.”

What was that?

Kyle glanced at the two of them, his arms crossed over his chest. Randolph’s face was blank as always, but San was grinning from ear to ear.

“Then where is King Ernst? Don’t tell me he’s playing hide-and-seek in the palace,” Kyle interjected.

“No, His Highness did go abroad,” Randolph answered. “Just not to Melvina. His grand departure was staged to make Daeg Gallus think he was going there. But I can guess where he went instead.”

San smiled.

“Once again, you’ve saved me the trouble of explaining everything. It’s really not complicated. A few things are at play. For instance, Faris is broke.”

“...I know that much.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t know, and you don’t understand. Oh, don’t take that the wrong way. I’m not blaming you or trying to push you away. It’s just, I don’t think you can imagine what it’s like, coming from such a wealthy place.”

The Faris native gazed out the window at the city below.

“But *I* do,” she said. “That’s why they’re making the first move, and why they’ve hired a large organization to help. Bluffing is the only hope they have of winning. Do you know what that means?”

Randolph must not have had an answer, because he frowned slightly.

“They are completely terrified of this country.”

Faris, terrified of Adelbide?

It ought to be the other way around, Kyle thought, given Faris was trying to start a war. It was a little hard to believe, and he took a minute to digest it.

Randolph's expression was equally stony.

"...What in the world did you propose to His Highness?" he asked San.

"The same thing I just told you. The hawks are afraid of Adelbide, so..."

San narrowed her lapis eyes and smiled blithely.

"...bluff right back."



It was cramped and hot and unbearable.

Squeezing his large body between the bookshelves, Hamsworth sighed softly.

Money, connections, and a little help from the gods had gotten him into the room in city hall where official records were kept. Even staff were normally forbidden from entering, so of course it wasn't heated or cooled. One false step would turn him into a plate of boiled pork.

As Hamsworth searched, panting, for the document, he suddenly felt a breeze. He turned around and saw that the door was open. A man entered.

"My, my, if it isn't the Earl Uls—"

Randolph's stern glance cut off his words.

"Any progress yet?" he asked coldly.

"Nothing much yet."

Hamsworth had already told him Rufus May was a member of Daeg Gallus. He was here at city hall to dig into the man's affairs, but considering Randolph could come and go in the record room as he pleased, headquarters must have already known that.

"If you find anything, send a message to me or Deputy Hughes at once," Randolph instructed him curtly before leaving the room. Hamsworth watched him go, blinking.

"...Did you do something to offend our favorite blockhead?"

Even Scarlett seemed suspicious as she gazed down on him. Unfortunately, Hamsworth couldn't think of anything.

After racking his brain for a moment, he clapped, having finally come up with one possibility.

“I did do the paperwork to dissolve Miss Grail’s engagement to him.”

Without Randolph’s permission.

“Ah, so he’s resentful.”

Hamsworth’s goddess gave a casual shrug, as if to imply she found the whole thing idiotic. Hamsworth smiled wryly. It seemed His Excellency the Grim Reaper had a surprisingly childish side. Of course, that would have been unthinkable just a few months ago.

What a strange girl, Hamsworth thought, narrowing his eyes. She was plain and ordinary, with nothing to distinguish her. But somehow, she’d changed not only Scarlett Castiel but the infamous Randolph Ulster.

“So did you find out anything about Rufus?” Scarlett asked, breaking Hamsworth’s reverie. Now back in the moment, he hurried to answer her.

“It seems the *real* Rufus May died over ten years ago. He was the last child of a noble branch family without much wealth. Seems they all but disowned him for bad behavior. Whether someone targeted him or it was a coincidence, I have no idea, but poor Rufus died shortly after arriving in the capital.”

“And that was when the new Rufus took on his identity? Did you find out why a powerless low-ranking noble was able to get a job at the Finance Bureau?”

“Earl Tudor seems to have been his guardian. They’ve always had connections with the Finance Bureau.”

“The Tudors?”

Scarlett frowned, but a moment later, her lips turned up in a suggestive smile.

“The man Teresa Jennings was having an affair with was a Tudor, too. Linus Tudor. Rumor had it that when she committed suicide, he returned to his native country heartbroken over his departed lover. He’s from Faris. Coincidence?”

Teresa’s husband, Kevin Jennings, was the one who had uncovered the secret of Princess Cecilia’s birth, and evidence suggested someone had hooked him on drugs in retaliation. Maybe Linus had been the one to take down Kevin, using

his lover, Teresa. Even though Linus was a foreigner, he was heir to the Tudor family. It was bizarre for him to go to Faris and not come back.

Hamsworth brought his hand to his chin.

“Hmm,” he muttered. “Maybe I should look into the Tudor family as well.”



“Oh, I forgot to tell you. *I’ve decided.*”

Cecilia was on her way back from a perfunctory visit to Enrique’s room when she ran into Krishna playing Rufus May.

No one else was in sight. The lady-in-waiting with her was from the organization, and for security reasons, Cecilia’s visits to Enrique were strictly scheduled. Krishna’s presence there was no coincidence.

Cecilia had a bad feeling about his words but nevertheless returned his sunny smile. Even if someone saw them, they would likely conclude the pair were only exchanging a few standard greetings.

“What did you decide?”

“I believe I mentioned before that I was going to kill the O’Brian girl? I’ve decided on a day.”

I knew it.

Cecilia held her breath and gazed at Krishna.

“I thought it would be perfect to do it on the day of Constance Grail’s execution,” he whispered in a singsong voice, his thin lips curling sadistically. “The day after tomorrow.”

“Oh?” Cecilia whispered back, lowering her eyes. She said no more.



Morning had come again.

Connie hugged her knees on the moldy pallet. Every time she felt like she couldn’t go on, she told herself everything would be fine.

Crying like a baby won’t make anyone come rescue you.

She was sure that's what Scarlett would have said. She could almost hear her exasperated voice. She rubbed her eyes. Then she thought of Randolph's knobby hands. They were so big and strong, and yet so gentle when they wiped away her tears.

She stared up at the stained ceiling, wondering if the date of her execution had been set. Was there still time left? Or— She knew she had to stay strong, but she constantly bumped up against the hopelessness of her situation, and it drained her energy. Her weakened mind dwelled incessantly on awful thoughts. What if everyone had given up on her? What if they had forgotten all about her?

Maybe that's why no one is visiting me.

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than a guard came to tell her she had a visitor. Her heavy heart grew a little lighter.

But when she heard the name of the visitor, she was perplexed.

"...Brenda?"

The door to the bleak meeting room swung open to reveal a chestnut-haired girl. She looked uneasy. Her shoulders twitched at the sound of her own name. She nodded, clearly on the verge of tears.

Brenda Harris was a baron's daughter and a member of Pamela Francis's clique. She was the one who had set Connie up at the Grand Merillian by pretending she'd stolen her hair ornament. Connie had heard she became estranged from Pamela after that, but— "Um...why are you here?"

Even after they'd sat down facing each other across the table, Brenda remained silent.

Connie was puzzled. She had never been especially close with Brenda. Of course, if they saw each other, they would say hello and sometimes chat for a while. But they hadn't been close enough for her to visit Connie like this.

That meant she must have a reason for coming.

Visiting time was limited. When Connie lost patience and asked again why she was there, Brenda flinched, then reached into her purse and took something

out.

She placed it gently on the table. It was a newspaper clipping.

She must have wanted Connie to read it. Connie reached out hesitantly and skimmed over the article. When she'd finished, she bit her lip.

The article was about everything her friends were doing to rescue her.

"Mylene, and Kate..."

"It's not just them," Brenda said, glancing nervously at Connie. It seemed she had finally made up her mind to speak.

"It's also your former fiancé—Neil Bronson—and the shipping baron Walter Robinson, and I'm not sure why, but the viscount, Dominic Hamsworth, too."

"...What?"

"Oh, and Earl Ulster, of course."

Connie clammed up. Her eyes felt hot.

She'd known. She'd known they would all try to help her. But all the same, at the bottom of her heart, she'd felt anxious.

The strength suddenly drained from her body. She let out a long, long sigh. The anxiety and fear seemed to flow away with her breath.

That was when she made up her mind to ask.

"Brenda," she began. "When is my execution?"

Brenda flinched. Her eyes darted around uncomfortably. Connie smiled wryly at the obvious reaction. She already knew she didn't have much time left. Otherwise, Brenda would never have gotten up the nerve to come see her like this.

The silent battle of wills ended with Brenda giving in.

"...Tomorrow, I heard."

"Oh."

Connie smiled. All sorts of emotions crashed down on her like waves in a storm. But strangely enough, the core of her heart stayed calm.

“...Constance Grail,” Brenda said as she looked into Connie’s smiling face.

“Yes?”

“I...”

She paused for a moment, evidently unsure whether to go on.

“I’ve decided to speak out against Pamela.”

Connie stared back at Brenda, blinking slowly. The fright from a moment ago had vanished from her eyes, replaced with firm resolve.

There was no sign of the girl who used to take her cues from Queen Pamela.

“About everything she’s done. About what happened to the people she targeted, and what kind of person she is. About whether evidence from a person like her is reliable. I plan to speak out about it all.”

Connie was speechless. Brenda looked down guiltily.

“...I know it’s late. If I had spoken out sooner, maybe things would have been different. But I was too scared.”

She stopped talking for a moment and bowed her head.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help you.”

Connie rushed to place her hand on Brenda’s thin shoulder. When she looked up, Connie said simply, “I don’t think you have anything to apologize for.”

Pamela was the one at fault, and the real villains were Daeg Gallus.

Brenda frowned.

“There’s something...I’ve wanted to say to you for a long time.”

She looked as if she might burst out crying any moment.

“Thank you for saving me back then,” she choked out.

Connie caught her breath. Memories of the Grand Merillian came flooding back. Pamela was trying to lay all the blame on Brenda.

But Connie wasn’t the one who had rescued her so dashing in her time of need.

“But it wasn’t me, Brenda, it was—”

Brenda raised her hand to interrupt.

“No, it was you,” she said, almost proudly. “Your sincerity is what saved me.”

I’m not alone.

When Connie returned to her empty cell after meeting with Brenda, she brought her clenched fist to her chest.

Everyone is fighting for me.

The despair that had been eating away at her heart was gone now. Of course, that didn’t mean her hopeless situation had taken a turn for the better. But—
But I realized something.

Never give up.

That’s what Scarlett would say.

After all, she might have been a pampered duke’s daughter, but she hated giving up.

Scarlett was a haughty, insensitive devil of a girl who treated people like they were less than human. And more than anything, she hated to lose. That was why she’d refused to give up until the last moment, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Of that, Connie was sure.

Just who do you think I am?

Connie felt like she could hear Scarlett whispering in her ear.

Lying on her pallet, she smiled and reached her hand toward the abyss pressing in on her.



Before Hamsworth knew it, the deep indigo of the night sky had separated into a layer of blue and another of orange, slowly blending together as the light grew.

It was almost dawn. The day of poor Constance Grail’s execution had finally arrived. Needless to say, the prospects for rescuing her were nonexistent.

Nevertheless...

“You seem quite calm,” he noted in surprise. Scarlett threw him a silent glance.

Then she snorted.

“Do you expect me to scream and yell? Or maybe to curse you? You useless pig! Like that?”

Hmm, that was rather nice. Almost like a reward.

“Listen to me, you nouveau riche pig.”

His anticipation must have been obvious, because she sneered down at him.

“The gods aren’t the ones who save people.”

Scarlett pointed to the window. Or rather, to the expanse of sky outside it.

“Take a look at that. We still have plenty of time. Did you think I had given up? Hurry and get to work, you dullard.”

A humble servant had but one choice in the face of such a lashing from his revered mistress: obey.

He returned to his task. When the sky began to turn white, Hamsworth let out a happy cry.

He had found the register for Earl Tudor’s company.

“It seems the House of Tudor was involved in the city hall’s renovation.”

He read out the contents of the document excitedly.

“Remember the lightning that set the building on fire just before you were executed? —Oh, I’m so sorry.”

He scrambled to apologize for his insensitivity, but Scarlett just shrugged.

“It’s fine. I don’t remember anything from the day of my execution.”

“You don’t?”

Hamsworth looked puzzled but quickly realized it made sense. The human mind defends itself. Who would want to remember the moment of their own death?

“No, not at all... Wait, that’s not quite right.”

Scarlett narrowed her amethyst eyes, as if she were watching a distant scene unfold.

“...I remember when the executioners came to my cell that day. One of them gave me some fruit water before they put the manacles on me. I don’t remember anything that happened after I drank it.”

Hamsworth nodded. The pieces were coming together.

“There must have been a tranquilizer in the water.”

“...What?”

“I’ve heard stories like that before. Public executions are shows. If the accused resists too much or shouts back, it spoils the fun. That’s why it’s common to give them something to numb—or rather calm—their emotions. If you can’t remember what happened, whatever they gave you must have affected you too strongly. Usually the church is the one to prepare it, but the ingredients are similar to the hallucinogen that Daeg Gallus uses—”

As he spoke, Hamsworth plumbed his memories of that day ten years ago. Scarlett had awed the jeering crowd with her beauty and elegance, plunging them into a swirl of terror with her curse-like words. Her wits had not seemed dull in the least, but...

Hamsworth glanced at her. She looked as if she’d accidentally poured salt into her tea.

“Am I wrong? I recall that Jackal’s Paradise never sat well with you. Just smelling it seemed to turn your stomach.”

“You’re right, but why do you know that?” she asked with deep disgust.

Hamsworth changed the subject. “Anyway, the tranquilizer used by the church comes from a rare fruit called the ‘thread of the Moirai.’ People say that, when consumed, it can scramble a person’s sense of time.”

“...And how is that relevant?”

It wasn’t. He’d just gotten carried away talking about the past. Brushing over it with a smile, he turned to the next page in the register, which contained plans

of the reconstructed city hall. His eyes widened, and he chuckled.

“Well, lookee here. I’d say this would be an ideal place to hide someone.”

According to the drawing, sprawling underground passages snaked beneath the square. If the hostages were in the capital, this was most likely where they were. He chuckled again.

“Very nice,” Scarlett interrupted in a voice accustomed to giving orders. “Tell the Royal Security Force immediately.”

Hamsworth brought his hand to his chest and bowed theatrically.

“As you wish, my lady.”

But would he make it in time? He silenced the worries that swirled in his mind. Whatever happened, his only choice was to keep going.

He pulled the documents together and rushed outside. Just before he climbed into a carriage, he paused to look up at the sky.

The sun was slowly climbing toward its peak. Dazzling light poured onto the earth like a new beginning.

“This time, I really will have the last laugh,” Scarlett muttered. “And I’ll make sure to rub their noses in it.”

Whatever the outcome, there was nowhere to go but forward.

After all, a path had finally opened up before them.

Hamsworth squinted at the strong light and stepped into the carriage.



There wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

Suddenly remembering the events of ten years ago, Cecilia frowned. *That day* had started out bright and sunny as well. No one had suspected a storm would suddenly blow in.

Cecilia pulled a chair to the bed and looked down at her handsome husband sleeping so deeply, he seemed dead.

Constance Grail’s execution was scheduled to take place before sunset. She

had about half a day left.

As she gazed absently at Enrique's even features, she saw his eyelashes twitch. Then his eyelids slowly lifted, revealing the brilliant magenta of his irises.

"...So you've come to finish me off?" he asked casually.

Cecilia sighed.

"If I genuinely meant to kill you, you'd be long dead by now."

"I see..."

Perhaps he hadn't fully regained consciousness, because the focus of his eyes wavered slightly.

"I was dreaming," Enrique said, pulling himself up sluggishly. "About something that happened just after we met."

He spoke falteringly, as if he were talking to himself.

"...Do you remember? Once, we slipped away from the palace and went to see some street performers who were supposed to be all the rage. On the way back, I was stupid enough to be pickpocketed. You caught the boy right away and said, 'Whatever the reason, you shouldn't do such things. You need to live life so you can keep your head held high.'"

Cecilia listened silently.

"I thought you were so wonderfully honest. Was all that a performance, too?"

His somber gaze made her catch her breath for an instant, but she quickly put on a wry smile. "Naturally."

She shrugged, snorting. It really was a stupid question. Ridiculous, even.

She had no right to say something so grand.

"Those were Cess's words."

It was easy to play a saint. After all, Cecilia had known a real one. All she had to do was think about what Cess would have said or done, and the answer was instantly obvious.

"...Cess?"

“Yes. She was the most beautiful person in the world, and the kindest, and the bravest.”

It was only natural that Enrique had fallen for her, and that the commoners loved her. After all, she was pretending to be Cecilia, but not *this* Cecilia.

She was copying the most beautiful creature she had ever encountered.

“She hated anything that wasn’t honest or just—”

Suddenly, she fell silent.

She had been pretending not to notice this whole time.

But the answer had always been there right in front of her nose.

Just like now.

“...You know, Enrique.”

She let out a quiet breath.

“I’ve always hated how careless you are.”

If he’d known Cecilia was deceiving him from the start, he shouldn’t have left himself so open to attack—let alone continue this meaningless conversation with her.

He’d always been like that, all these years.

He knew the answer. He was simply careless.

She glanced down for an instant and muttered, “But just for today, I’m going to praise you for your *carelessness*.”

Ten years wasn’t a short amount of time. It was more than enough to start *hating* a man she had at first neither liked nor disliked.

She looked up and smiled brightly. Yes, ten years was plenty of time. Enrique must have realized something, because his face tensed.

“...Cecilia?”

She pushed him back as he tried to resist, landing a blow on the nape of his defenseless neck. Consciousness slipped easily from the ill man. His upper body toppled over listlessly.

Cecilia sighed. Such a careless man. Careless, and yet, that was what had saved her. Though she had hated it.

She drew in a deep breath.

“Help, somebody!” she shouted.

A chorus of footsteps ran toward them. She slipped quietly into the hallway, leaving the now noisy room behind.

Glaring sunlight poured in through a high window.

Sharp-eyed maids and guards were chasing after her. Ignoring their attempts to speak to her, she hurried down the covered passageway.

“Greetings, Rufus.”

“Oh, Your Highness. There seems to be a commotion in the palace; has something happened?”

“Actually, His Highness’s condition has taken a turn for the worse—”

Pretending to have suddenly become dizzy, she slumped against Rufus’s chest.

“I’m sorry, I felt a little faint.”

“That won’t do,” he answered, wrapping a solicitous arm around her before lowering his voice. “Today is the execution. It would be a bother if he died on us.”

“Don’t worry, it was only an asthma attack.”

“Then that’s fine.”

He released her. They chatted for a moment, and he continued on as if nothing had happened.

Cecilia watched silently as Rufus May—no, as Krishna—walked away from her. When he’d disappeared from view, she quietly opened her clenched palm.

On it lay a key. It was brass and exquisitely wrought. She jangled it playfully. It made a pleasant clinking sound.

Cecilia smiled.

The child was universally known as a thief.

“Your Highness, where in the world—” a maid called out to Cecilia as she strode quickly away from the palace.

Cecilia beckoned for her to come into the shadows of the hallway, then knocked her unconscious. She swiftly exchanged the maid’s clothes for her own, and when a guard approached to see what had happened, she pierced his neck with a pin coated in a fast-acting tranquilizer. His body stiffened abruptly and slid to the ground. *That should knock him out for a while*, she thought.

Outside the villa, Cecilia made for Saint Mark’s Square. Behind city hall stood a row of statues of famous people installed to commemorate the construction of the history museum. Concealed among them was a tarnished brass plate. She grasped the handle and pulled it up, revealing a staircase leading underground.

The cavern was cool and dark. After she had walked for a few minutes, she encountered a guard. He seemed surprised to see her.

Cecilia smiled calmly. “I was told to bring out the hostages. Didn’t you receive the message?”

The man shook his head in confusion.

“I haven’t heard—”

“That’s odd,” she said, stepping toward him. In a fluid movement, she pulled out a knife and sliced through his carotid artery. He fell wordlessly, blood spouting from his neck. *One down.*

Glancing around warily, she continued on until she caught sight of the man guarding the hostages’ cell. He must have been bored, because he was lounging against the stone wall. Cecilia wiped the blood and grease off her knife with her dress, then threw it at him with a flick of her wrist. The metal cut through the air with a swish, followed a second later by a scream. The man fell to the ground. It seemed she had hit his thigh. As he groaned in pain, she circled behind him, grabbed his jaw, and twisted with all her might. He expired with a dull, garbled moan.

“...Your Highness, the Crown Princess?” a voice said breathlessly. It was Lucia O’Brian. She was standing protectively in front of Ulysses, whose hand was

pressed to his mouth.

Without answering her, Cecilia approached the cell. She took the brass key she had stolen from Krishna and inserted it into the lock on the iron bars. The latch snapped open.

Lucia stared at her, eyes wide.

In the distance, Cecilia could hear footsteps rushing toward them. She would have welcomed some support, but unfortunately, the possibility they were here to help was slim. She had known from the start that it wouldn't take that high-strung man long to notice his key was missing.

They probably wouldn't be able to go back the same way she'd taken.

"If you go straight down the passage to the right, you will come to a staircase leading to the square," she said.

The pathways in the underground cavern were as tangled as a spiderweb. For that reason, there were a number of exits. The way she had come led to a dead end, but just to the side was another route.

The children remained as still as if they'd been struck by lightning. They seemed unable to process this sudden turn of events.

"Didn't you hear me? Hurry, go now—"

As she spoke, a wave of déjà vu surged up in her chest. The scene played behind her eyelids before she could stop it. The red flames roaring like living creatures. The charred smell. The painfully hot wind. The horrible sound that drew closer with every second. And— *Go, hurry! If they see you, they'll follow you to the ends of the earth.*

Before she realized it, Cecilia was screaming.

"Go!"

Just like Cess had done so many years ago.

Lucia was the first to move, of course.

Spurred by Cecilia's scream, she grabbed Ulysses's hand and took off running with a force out of scale with her small body. Soon, they had vanished into the

shadows.

Cecilia burst out laughing. How full of life the girl was!

After slowly bringing her breath back under control, Cecilia glanced over her shoulder. As she had predicted, she saw the grim face of Krishna—and a pack of armed companions. She recognized some of their faces, but fortunately, Salvador was not among them. Even if he discovered the escaped children aboveground, he would most likely let them go.

Krishna glanced past Cecilia into the cell, then raised one eyebrow in displeasure.

“What the hell is this?”

Cecilia shrugged at the idiotic question. “What else could I do?”

“What did you say?”

Krishna raised his eyebrows. Cecilia snorted.

“I said, what else could I do? I had no other choice. We were doomed to failure from the start, from the moment Scarlett Castiel was executed.”

Ten years ago, destiny had changed course.

That woman had changed it.

Scarlett Castiel had changed the course of destiny.

Krishna opened his mouth in evident irritation.

“...Where is the young prince?”

Cecilia smiled.

“To hell if I’ll tell you, you low-life scum,” she said, turning her thumb toward the ground. Cecilia gazed at Krishna standing dumbfounded before her and laughed. The heavy, stagnant fog that had been suffocating her heart for so long cleared away, leaving a lovely, fresh sensation in its wake.

She felt very calm. Smiling peacefully, she stepped forward. In the center of her field of vision, Krishna cut his hand downward through the air, his face blank.

“Shoot.”

His frigid voice echoed through the cavern.

An instant later, a barrage of gunshots pierced Cecilia’s body. She didn’t even have time to shield herself. The force, strong enough to shatter her skull, made her feel for a moment as if her whole body were burning. But then all sensation vanished. She fell forward onto the ground, arms spread wide. Blood spilled from her mouth.

I’m glad, she thought. So glad. This means—

This means it will all be over.

She let out a slow breath.

I wonder if I managed to do the right thing in the end.

If I haven’t, then I won’t be able to face them—to face her.

Whose voice do you want to hear?

As her consciousness faded, she recalled the serious face of the girl who had asked her that question. At the time, she had it brushed off as idiotic.

But she hoped in the end, just once—

So the fire has come for me, too.



She smiled wryly at her childish, unreasonable wish. And then, it happened.

Good job!

Her eyes widened as a cheerful voice flew to her ears.

I knew you would do it, Cici!

There was no way she could mistake that lively, confident voice.

Ahhh. Cecilia's face crumpled in overwhelming relief. Ahhh, I could hear her after all. If only I'd listened, I could have heard her whenever I wanted.

Far away, she saw the smiling faces of the people she loved. What a roundabout path she had taken to reach them.

Cecilia—*Cici*—smiled and closed her eyes as if falling asleep.

Krishna checked to make sure Cecilia was dead in the pool of her own blood, then stood up.

"Withdraw. We search for the prince now."

He spun on his heels. Then he groaned.

"Good day, Honorable Assistant to the Vice-Comptroller-General."

Krishna was all too familiar with the even-featured face smiling cheerfully at him from behind the muzzle of a gun.

"...You."

Ranks of military police with rifles at the ready stood behind the man. And that wasn't all. Footsteps were approaching from every direction, cutting off all possibility of escape.

Krishna ground his molars.

"Oh, or are you vice-comptroller-general now? Anyhow, it doesn't matter."

"Why are you here?"

"Divine guidance, as they say. Unfortunately, it wasn't a lovely goddess who showed me the way but a middle-aged porker," the man joked. His eyes did not smile.

“I’ll give you a choice,” Kyle Hughes announced with profound amusement. “Die now, or die later? Of course, either way, your time is up.”

Gunfire rang out in the distance.

Ulysses froze as the metallic sound echoed cruelly through the cavern. He couldn’t help glancing over his shoulder. Lucia squeezed his hand.

“Don’t look back.”

He turned to her in surprise. Her solemn expression was far beyond her years.

“Look ahead, Uly.”

Her voice was soft, but it had a force he could not resist.

“We have to live. We have to survive. If we don’t, she’ll have died for nothing.”

Ulysses hesitated for a second, then he nodded and began walking again. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d walked so far. His wasted muscles made his legs unsteady, and his heart was pounding. The door to the surface felt impossibly far away.

Somehow, though, they made it. Bright sunlight assaulted his eyes. He reflexively shaded his face with his hand. Where were they? He squinted and looked around. They seemed to be in a woodland surrounded by low hills. He could see Saint Mark’s Bell Tower in the distance. That meant they weren’t too far from the square.

He was thinking they had better head for a main road, when a surprised voice called to them from behind.

“What are you two doing here?”

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a girl with a deep hood hiding in the shade of the trees. It was Shoshanna. Her eyes looked about ready to pop out as she stared at them.

“What in the world...,” she began. But as she spoke, she seemed to guess the answer, because she grew steadily paler. Ulysses was equally upset. What if there were armed enemies nearby? Would she bring them back to that dark, scary dungeon? The moment the thought entered his mind, he froze.

As the two of them stared at one another warily, Lucia broke in.

“Someone’s coming.”

Ulysses followed her gaze and saw a large woman trotting down the hill toward them, a huge sword on her back. Ulysses gasped at the familiar face.

“A friend of yours?” Lucia asked.

He nodded, holding back his excitement. Lucia nodded in return, turned to Shoshanna, and said as casually as if she were greeting a friend, “Anyway, if you’re going to run, you’d better do it now.”

“Huh?” Shoshanna blurted out.

Ulysses stared at Lucia in equal surprise.

“...You’re going to let me escape?” their kidnapper mumbled in a daze.

Lucia gave her a troubled smile, paused for a moment, and then said, “The crown princess wasn’t a good person, was she?”

Shoshanna frowned suspiciously at the abrupt question. Naturally, she had no idea what Lucia was talking about.

“But that doesn’t mean I think she ought to die. I don’t know her well enough to think that.”

Of course, since the princess was one of *them*, she might have been a really cruel person. She might have hurt or even killed some people. And to her victims, her death might have seemed right.

But like Lucia, Ulysses didn’t know anything about her. Maybe he would learn more one day, but at the very least, the reason they were here right now was because a woman named Cecilia had saved them.

“You helped us, Shoshanna.”



Shoshanna flinched.

“When I was hit, you brought me ice, and you chased away that violent guard.”

“But that...”

Shoshanna’s stern expression was quickly melting into confusion.

“I’m not so rude I wouldn’t thank you for that.”

Lucia’s lips curled into an easygoing smile. It wasn’t simply a kind smile—it showed her resolve.

“So make your escape. But please don’t forget this. Any crime you commit from this moment on is also a crime committed by Lucia O’Brian.”

“It’s time.”

Connie opened her eyes and slowly stood. Her plain gray shift had been made specially for the occasion.

As she left her cell, the guard quietly handed her a cup filled with crimson liquid. She immediately tensed. Could there be poison in the drink? As she hesitated, a dull voice said from behind, “It’s only juice.”

She turned to find a familiar figure. Today, however, his barrel-shaped form was clad in white ceremonial robes.

“...Viscount Hamsworth?”

“Our mutual friend instructed me not to make you drink anything strange,” the viscount whispered so the guard wouldn’t hear. Then he giggled. Connie gave him a questioning look. *Our mutual friend?*

For now, however, she decided to take him at his word. The portly priest was more sullied than most in his profession, but as far as she knew, he wasn’t a bad person.

No sooner had she drunk down the juice than the guard fastened manacles on her wrists. Together with her executioners, she was led to a wagon and loaded in.

As the gate leading from Moldavite Palace to the square was unlocked, an

angry roar erupted. It grew louder as she stepped down from the wagon.

Just like ten years ago, she thought.

She glanced up at the sky. It was covered by damp, leaden clouds. Even that was the same as ten years ago.

But I'll never be able to handle this like she did.

She silenced the crowd with her overpowering beauty and nobility. With this plain old face of mine, I couldn't do that if I turned myself inside out.

Connie smiled wryly, took a deep breath, and began walking.

"Traitor!" someone screamed as she walked toward the executioner's platform.

"Beast!"

"Demon!"

"Where did you hide the prince?"

Jeers flew at her. She bit her lip.

Just then, a loud voice echoed across the square.

"What an infernal racket! This is why I hate snot-nosed, hairless brats! Do you need a taste of my whip?"

A procession of young women dressed like they were going to a ball filed into the square, led by a neatly outfitted matron, her back straight as a rod. The crowd fell silent at their otherworldly splendor, stepping back to make way.

"Audrey has such a foul mouth."

"What a fool you are, Miriam. Everything about her is foul, including her character."

The elegant women bantered and giggled. Within minutes, men, women, and even little children were gazing at them, spellbound.

Connie's mouth fell open. As she was staring at them in shock, a new voice entered the square from another direction.

"Constance Grail is innocent!"

Unfortunately, she could not make out its owner among the crush of spectators.

“Fine, everyone gets a little stubborn and out of hand now and then. But Constance Grail doesn’t have a bad hair on her head! If ever a person is in trouble, she will come to their aid without a moment’s hesitation! Yet they accuse her of kidnapping a child? She would never do such a thing! You’re fools, every last one of you...!”

Nevertheless, there was no mistaking that voice. It was Kate. Her ever-smiling, gentle friend was shouting in indignation.

“It’s true! I have testimony from a girl who was friends with Pamela Francis! Those of you who want to know the details, it’s all right here in the special edition! Come and get your copy!”

The slightly cheeky voice must belong to Mylene.

Only moments ago, the crowd was fired up like a group of bullies ready to tear the wings off an insect, but now the cruel, agitated atmosphere had been replaced by a buzz of doubtful voices. The breeze of public opinion was shifting unexpectedly in the square.

Connie blinked. What in the world was going on?

Drops of rain began to fall from the sagging blanket of clouds. Soon, the drops became a downpour battering the ground.

Suddenly, everyone was looking at Connie. They were all waiting for her to speak. Although she felt delirious, she opened her mouth to try to meet their expectation.

But the next instant, someone kicked her violently in the back, and she collapsed to the ground. Ruthless hands yanked her hair, forcing her to her knees.

“Constance Grail!”

The man shouting her name belonged to the Royal Security Force. She recognized him—Jeorg Gaina, the one who had interrogated her over the kidnapping.

“You will now be beheaded for the crime of kidnapping the prince of the neighboring kingdom and planning to overthrow the government!”

The executioner standing at his side lifted his sword high above his head.

Without a moment’s pause, the blade whooshed through the air. Screams erupted in the crowd. Connie squeezed her eyes shut.

To hell with regrets!

Connie heard a groan above her head, followed by the sound of metal hitting something hard.

The blow did not come. She cautiously opened her eyes. The executioner was crouching beside her. For some reason, a knife was sticking out of his wrist, and blood was dripping onto the ground.

His sword lay beside his feet.

“No more!”

Connie’s heart skipped a beat at the deep voice. She looked up and saw black hair and cerulean eyes.

There he was—the man with the frightening face. The most awkward man in the world, and the kindest.

“This execution is invalid!” he screamed, though his breath was short and his forehead beaded with sweat. “If you want the prince, he’s right here!”

Connie glanced over and saw a large woman with a messy ponytail the color of the sun standing by Randolph. It was San. In her arms was a boy whose violet eyes sparkled like jewels—most likely Prince Ulysses.

San set the boy down on the ground. He was young, but his face looked intelligent. Though he seemed exhausted, his voice did not waver as he spoke.

“I was kidnapped by men from my homeland, Faris! This woman had nothing to do with it!”

A stir went through the crowd, spreading ripples of confusion.

“Nonsense,” Gaina howled in obvious panic. “Who could believe that? And you—the woman over there. I know who you are!”

He pointed at San.

“You called yourself San, but—”

Gaina’s face distorted hideously as he raised his voice to a shriek.

“There is no San among the supporters of the third princess of Faris!”



Several days before Constance Grail was to be executed, a sudden development struck the villa on the west grounds of the Royal Palace of Faris, once inhabited by Queen Anna, like a bolt from the blue.

“...What do you mean?” Roderick asked angrily, trying to shake off the confusion that had welled up when the chamberlain brought the message. “*Ernst* has come to Faris?”

The chamberlain informed him that the king had come with the smallest retinue of guards possible, evidently trying to avoid notice.

Apparently, he claimed to have come to visit King Hendrick, saying the two had been friends since before Hendrick ascended to the throne.

“Friends? What a joke. They’ve only met a handful of times! Anyhow, isn’t he supposed to be in Melvina right now?!”

“N-no, actually, it seems Duke Castiel is the one who went to Melvina—”

“The old fox...! What the hell is he up to?”

The prince did not hide his displeasure. But quickly, he changed his mind and smiled.

“On second thought, this could work in our favor. He may be king, but that doesn’t give him the right to enter a foreign country without a formal invitation. Who could be blamed for calling it an invasion? Of course, we’ll ask him to leave most courteously, but we might as well get a few favors in return.”

The timing of the king’s visit was irritating, but it could serve as a good excuse for pushing forward preparations for war. After all, Theophilis would be out of the way soon. That hopelessly negligent man had left the night before to visit a shrine, intending to lay the groundwork for his impending accession to the

throne. Little did he know the trip was a slyly laid trap.

Theophilis would not return to the palace alive.

A cruel smile played over the finely featured face Roderick had inherited from his mother. He turned to the chamberlain and ordered him to help prepare for a meeting with Ernst.

But the white-faced chamberlain did not budge.

“What’s wrong, man?”

“About th-the invitation. He said he received one...”

“What are you talking about?”

“King Ernst said he was invited here by the third princess.”



“Bluff right back?”

Randolph echoed the words of the visitor from Faris.

He had asked what she talked to His Highness about, and she had answered, of all things, that the conversation was about bluffing. Naturally, he was skeptical.

“That’s right. To be honest, I wanted King Ernst’s support. But it’s like Deputy Hughes said just now. We’ve got a lot going against us. The king would be hard-pressed to say yes. If anything went wrong, it could spark war.”

Kyle nodded firmly.

“So in the end, I didn’t say much,” San continued. “I only asked him to visit King Hendrick on his sickbed.”

Something about her words didn’t sit right with Randolph. She must have sensed that, because she smiled and said, “It’s true. I brought a letter from Alexandra. I was planning to visit Adelbide even before Uly was kidnapped.”

“A letter...?”

“Yes. King Ernst is a good man. He was kind enough to tell me that while he couldn’t do much for the third princess, he could pay his *friend* a visit.”

She couldn't mean King Hendrick, could she? Randolph had no recollection of the two kings being friends.

Kyle must have been thinking the same thing, because he eyed her suspiciously.

"Wait just a second now," he said. "You're telling me that Duke Castiel went to Melvina in the king's place merely so the king could visit a sick acquaintance?"

"Oh, that was just a coincidence."

"...What?"

"The duke *happened* to be there when the king granted me an audience. The king and the duke are close, no? The duke suggested that since the king was already preparing to go to Melvina, he could simply change his destination. And the duke could go to Melvina in his place."

San smiled like a naughty child at the two confused investigators.

"That's the whole story. As for how Roderick and Daeg Gallus interpret it—well, that's another matter entirely."



"...You say Alexandra issued the invitation to King Ernst?"

It was unthinkable. Roderick laughed off the chamberlain's ridiculous claim. She was locked up in a cell in a tower on the castle grounds, unable to do anything. Even if she'd paid off the guards, it should have been impossible to act so boldly.

"Yes. There's no mistake about it. King Ernst had the official letter with him, signed by Lady Alexandra. And, well, he has already been admitted to the palace as a guest of honor—"

Blood rushed to Roderick's head.

"On whose orders?!" he shouted with a look sharp enough to cut.

The chamberlain scrambled to explain.

"Prince Theophilis ordered it! He chased us all away! He is currently

surrounded by his private soldiers, and I haven't a clue what's going on...!"

Roderick ground his teeth. He was so irate, he almost felt dizzy.

Now Theophilis was part of this mess?

That fool's feet were supposed to be tangled in a trap at this very moment. Roderick clicked his tongue in fury. How long? How long had Theophilis been in league with Alexandra? And why had King Ernst come to Faris? Did he truly think anyone would believe his flimsy excuse about visiting the ill king?

Daeg Gallus didn't say anything about this... No sooner had the thought entered his head than he jolted up and scanned the room. How strange. No matter how he thought about it, this was too strange. How could everyone have been so taken by surprise?

And then, among his panicked underlings, he spotted the liaison, the one who always kept him informed. The man was just as panicked—and for the first time, the blood drained from Roderick's face.



"I know exactly what kind of man the second prince is," San said with a grin. "He's a fool, plain and simple."

Randolph frowned, unsure how to answer.

"I'd be willing to bet Prince Roderick is in an absolute frenzy over King Ernst's visit. Daeg Gallus was his only hope, but this time they won't be able to do a thing. Because they don't know about it. Once he finds out even Prince Theophilis is involved, he'll probably be petrified."

"...You talk like you saw it all happen."

King Ernst had left Adelbide over ten days ago. He might well have made it to Faris by now and caused the reaction San described, but Randolph couldn't imagine a report would have arrived yet.

"I wish you'd compliment my powers of imagination. But the point is, Roderick is a suspicious man, and I'm certain he's asking plenty of questions. Such as how long Theophilis and Alexandra have been in league, why King Ernst is there, and what his aim is. The truth is, he's simply there to visit the ill king.

But with Alexandra imprisoned, he can't know the truth. So what will he do? Try to confirm his guesses, I'll bet."

San smiled with profound happiness.

"And our captive princess will be freed."



What was happening? What the hell was going on?

Roderick sat down in a chair and fidgeted in irritation. One of his white-faced aides approached him.

"Your Highness, it's hard to imagine, but..."

"...What?"

"...could it be that Alexandra has already joined forces with Adelbide...?"

"Don't be stupid!"

"B-but then why did King Ernst come to Faris? Do you believe his story about visiting the king? And for Lord Theophilis to act like that, when not long ago they were enemies—"

His aides whispered among themselves.

Roderick could stand no more. Before he knew it, he was on his feet, screaming.

"I'm going to the tower! I will make that woman explain this to me! I'll have her motive before I'm through!"

He stormed off to the tower immediately, his attendants in tow. Alexandra was locked up at the top of the tallest of the three watchtowers. The cell had been constructed primarily for highborn prisoners. It was not a cage but rather a cylindrical room, and once the door was locked, it was impossible to open from inside. Even food was delivered through a vent.

When Roderick opened the single, tightly closed iron door to the tower, a moldy draft spilled out along with a shaft of sunlight. Beneath the skylight stood a woman, gaunt but still beautiful, facing him with a smile.

Roderick stared at her in disbelief.

“No!”

He stepped back, the blood draining from his face.

“No—that’s not Alexandra!”

Even to himself, his voice sounded like a shriek. But no—it wasn’t her. Yes, her hair color and her eyes were identical to Alexandra’s, and the general features of her face were similar. From a distance, you might confuse them. But not from close up. This was a different woman.

“Who are you...?” he asked in a shaky voice. She bowed her head in a perfect retainer’s bow.

“My name is Aliana, Prince Roderick.”

“Ali...ana?” he echoed in a daze.

“Yes,” she answered firmly. “I have the honor of serving Queen Alexandra as a lady-in-waiting. My friends call me *Allie*.”



There is no San among the supporters of the third princess of Faris!

When Connie, still crouched on the executioner’s platform, heard Jeorg Gaina’s words, she looked up in surprise at San. The big-boned woman with hair the color of the sun and eyes like lapis lazuli smiled back at her a little awkwardly. Ulysses clung to her leg, a puzzled look on his face.

“I don’t know who that boy is, but I find the claim that he’s the prince extremely suspicious,” Gaina said, shaking his head theatrically as if he found the situation most regrettable. Another wave of whispers surged through the crowd.

San said nothing. She simply watched the scene unfold. Connie wondered in a panic why she would not speak. Why didn’t she contradict him? Why did she let the doubts multiply?

There seemed to be nothing false in the way she worried over the kidnapped prince and tried so earnestly to save him.

Just as shouts of suspicion and condemnation were beginning to rise from the

crowd, a quiet voice silenced them.

“The boy before you is without a doubt Prince Ulysses.”

A middle-aged man stepped forward. Although he was neatly dressed, he looked exhausted. And his hair was unmistakably thinning.

I’ve seen that man before, Connie thought.

“Kendall!” Ulysses shouted happily.

“Oh!” Connie blurted out. That’s right—Kendall. Kendall Levine, the special envoy from Faris. But she had thought he was back in his homeland by now.

“You made it here fast,” San said, raising her eyebrows in surprise.

“This old body can still move when it has to. And I had the horse gallop the whole way,” Kendall replied with a shrug. “Here.”

He withdrew a document from his breast pocket and held it out to San.

“I’ve brought a letter of approval from the meeting of the Council that just took place.”

“So the motion carried on such short notice.”

“Prince Theophilis put in a good word—but King Ernst’s visit was key. Those with a hand in the plans for war must have been terrified by the thought that the princess already had ties with his kingdom. Our bluff may have been hastily put together, but it was very effective. We have the approval of the shrine as well, so all that’s left is for you to sign, my lady.”

“Is that so?” San said, unfolding the letter. Suddenly, she grimaced. “They want me to seal the signature with my blood? A bit behind the times, I’d say.”

“I’m afraid that is the custom,” Kendall replied.

San sighed, then signed fluidly with the pen he handed her. When she was done, she unwrapped the large sword on her back.

“Unfortunately, some of the blood in these veins isn’t very noble—”

She slid the blade over the pad of her thumb and sloppily pressed the budding droplet onto the document.

“This good enough?”

Kendall nodded in satisfaction. “I think that should be plenty,” he said.

Then he kneeled deferentially and looked up at Ulysses and San.

“Allow me to say once again how glad I am that you are both unharmed, *Your Royal Highnesses.*”

Connie blinked.

“...Highnesses?”

San smiled like a child whose prank had just been exposed.

“That we are. My name is Alexandra Faris. Legitimate heir to the royal throne of Faris, and...”

She held up the letter for Connie to see.

“...as of this very moment, the new queen.”



So Alexandra had us wrapped around her finger the whole time.

That was the thought running through Theophilis’s mind as he stared down at Roderick kneeling dejectedly at his feet. Theophilis had pretended to fall into the trap set by Daeg Gallus, but instead had waited for the right moment to storm the tower with his private troops. And now here he was.

Roderick was a cowardly man. Without Daeg Gallus, he most likely would have given up his right to the throne long ago. That’s why Theophilis had misread him. He’d left him alone, viewing him as beneath consideration.

But Alexandra was different. She had found an opportunity to use Roderick.

And this was the result.

Theophilis laughed mockingly at himself.

The circumstances should have been to my advantage. If only it weren’t for Roderick—

—or if Queen Anna were still alive...then things might have turned out differently.

Something occurred to him then.

Had Queen Anna really died of illness?

No, an autopsy had been performed. There could be no mistake. But the Second Shrine had presided over the death—and Eularia was at the Second Shrine.

Theophilis followed the thread of his thoughts that far and stopped. He hated pointless endeavors. He would never know the answer, and even if he did, it would be meaningless.

Anyhow, things would soon be getting busy. For some reason, Kendall Levine had been in a great rush to gather support for the new queen. It seemed certain he would take advantage of the visit from the king of Adelbide to gain the Council's approval within the next few days.

A voice broke into Theophilis's thoughts.

"...Where is the real Alexandra?" Roderick asked.

Theophilis looked at him. His brother seemed to be clinging desperately to any shred of hope. Another few steps and everything should have been his.

"In Adelbide, of course," replied the smiling woman who had been locked up in the tower in her place. Roderick's mouth trembled. As he sank limply to the floor, Theophilis bound him. The miserable man lacked even the strength to resist.

His aides put up much more of a fight, but they were no match for the sheer number of Theophilis's private soldiers. All of them were bound and taken to the dungeon.

Theophilis stepped into the now-quiet cell and gazed down at the woman who so closely resembled his older sister. Although she presented herself as a lady-in-waiting, Kendall Levine had told him that she was, in fact, Alexandra's standin.

Aliana was her name, if he remembered right.

"Weren't you afraid of dying?" Theophilis asked out of sudden curiosity. One false step and she might truly have been executed in Alexandra's place.

The woman glanced at him.

“I am no more than her shadow. I would welcome the opportunity to offer up my life in her service. And besides,” she continued, “San never breaks a promise.”

She spoke as if that was the most important point.

Theophilis snorted. How ridiculous.

“You think she can rebuild this country?”

“Of course I do.”

Theophilis nodded. Knowing Alexandra, she just might do it.

Then he frowned, irritated at himself for having such a stupid thought.

“But I must admit,” the woman mumbled in a mystified voice, “I was certain you and San got on horribly.”

“That rat Roderick was on the verge of murdering me. My sister saved my life. It’s only natural to return a favor.”

“That is most gracious of you, Your Highness. May I ask your true feelings?”

“You think I can beat the legendary Kendall Levine at a negotiation? After he told me Roderick was planning to have me assassinated, he threatened to withhold further information unless I cooperated. Can you believe it? Those brutes as good as told me they’d leave me to the dogs.”

“...I see.”

“On the other hand, if I withdrew my immediate claim to the throne, they promised me a post. And I won’t have to give up my succession rights entirely, it seems. If Alexandra dies before producing an heir, I will be the next king. I suggest she take care not to incite any insurrections.”

With a smile, Theophilis turned to leave, his velvet cloak flapping behind him.

Left alone, Aliana looked up at the tower skylight far overhead. She shaded her eyes and turned her thoughts to the eastern sky—to Adelbide.



“The new queen...?”

“Well, the coronation hasn’t happened yet,” San joked. Connie was dumbfounded.

“Are you hurt?” Randolph asked, running to her. Without so much as a glance at the new queen of Faris, he knelt beside Connie and peered into her face.

His cerulean eyes inspected her from head to toe. When they arrived at the manacles still clasped to her wrists, they narrowed slightly. He wordlessly pulled several long, thin pins from the breast pocket of his military uniform, inserted one of them into the lock hanging from the manacles, and dexterously spun it.

The lock popped open with a metallic click.

“...Your wrists are red,” he said, taking them gently in his hands. Her heart pounded.

“I’m f-fine!” she said, shaking her hands to show him. His tense expression relaxed slightly, and Connie smiled weakly back.

“Queen, you say? What nonsense...,” Gaina exclaimed, seeming to have regained his senses. Shaking like a wet dog, he looked again and again in San’s direction.

“Give up,” Randolph said, his voice low. “I know about your connection to Rufus May. We’ve already arrested him. Your other associates, too. It’s over.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a squadron of military police surrounded Gaina. He grimaced, roughly batting away the hands that reached out to restrain him.

“You won’t get away with this...!” he shouted like a curse, reaching for his hip. He pulled out a fist-sized lump of steel, yanked out the pin, and waved it wildly above his head.

“Get down!” Randolph screamed.

A second later, there was a roar like the rumbling of an earthquake. Connie was blown off her feet by the blast, her back slamming against the ground.

The force of the blow knocked the wind out of her.

The next thing she knew, black smoke was rising up before her eyes. People were screaming and running in every direction. She seemed to have twisted her ankle when she fell, and she could not stand up.

She looked up and saw that the base of the statue of Adelbide's founding father, Amadeus, was crumbling immediately above her. It must have been hit by the explosion. With its foundation gone, the statue teetered perilously.

Instead of falling backward, which would have been much more convenient, the shadow loomed slowly over Connie.

But she could not escape.

"Connie!"

Just then, a desperate-looking Randolph planted both hands on the ground, covering her with his own body. She screamed.

The two of them would be flattened together.

"Please get off, Your Excellency! I'm begging you, get off of me!"

"I will not retreat!"

Boor Excellency! On the verge of tears, Connie struggled beneath his arms to push him off, but his stubborn body, like a cage of iron around her, would not budge. She could see the statue of Amadeus toppling toward them. She had no time.

"Help, somebody...!" Connie shrieked. *Somebody, anybody!*

"Scarlett!"

She heard something shatter.

The enormous statue above her head instantly disintegrated into fragments. At the same time, wind swirled into a vortex. Her hair and skirt flapped in the air. Along with the dust, the whirlwind sucked in the mass of crushed stone that had been flying down toward them like a rain of arrows and carried it far away.

Connie watched, wide-eyed, as the magical scene unfolded like something straight out of a fairy tale.

"Remember this, Constance Grail."

The voice was as light and clear as a bell.

Black hair, as if scooped from the depth of night, streamed in the wind.

The amethyst eyes were like caged stars set in an irresistibly bewitching face.

Scarlett was the very picture of a notorious vixen. She puffed out her chest proudly.

“Heroes always arrive late.”



Imagine, having to trouble myself like this!

Awfully cheeky of Connie, in my opinion.

Scarlett sighed.

It was quite exhausting work not only to demolish a statue but also to manipulate the wind to sweep the pieces away. No doubt she had used that superhuman strength said to come out in emergencies. She could feel the energy draining from every corner of her body. Normally, it would have left her too exhausted to stand, but this time, for some reason, the sensation felt as pleasant as lolling in a patch of spring sunlight.

The fire from the explosion had already been put out, and the military police had evacuated all the spectators to a safe place.

The large woman and the boy said to be the prince seemed safe as well. The only one hurt, it seemed, was that balding old goat Kendall. Apparently, he'd banged up his rear end and had to be carried off to a first-aid station, much to San's amusement.

Randolph Ulster wore a rare look of surprise as he gaped at the remains of the statue. The girl encircled in his arms, staring at Scarlett with eyes peeled wide, seemed somehow to be doing just fine.

I suppose this will put an end to Constance Grail's execution.

After parting ways with Hamsworth at dawn, Scarlett had been following the military police, so she knew the current situation. The undercover arm of Daeg Gallus in Adelbide had been pulverized. Rufus May and all the other

perpetrators of the present crime had been arrested, and Prince Johan's daughter, whom they had kidnapped, had been rescued unharmed. Pamela Francis's testimony would likely soon be withdrawn.

Ernst would return from Faris any day now. She had heard that her father, Adolphus, had already departed from Melvina. Everything would be fine.

Connie's name would be cleared.

Unlike ten years ago.

Scarlett let out another long sigh. Yes, Connie really had behaved with unbelievable impertinence.

The nerve, worrying Scarlett like that.

"I'm going to tell you something right now, young lady," she announced, planting one hand on her hip and frowning sternly as she descended to Connie's side. "If you'd gotten yourself hurt, I'd never have forgiven you!"

Scarlett had gone to a lot of trouble for this. She did not intend to forgive any idiotic behavior on Connie's part. Connie, who had been watching her in a daze, suddenly gasped and her eyes went wide.

The blood drained from her face until finally she wailed, "Scarlett...?!"

Wondering what all the fuss was about, Scarlett followed Connie's gaze and realized her own body had become transparent. She must have used too much energy. But no—this was different.

When she raised her arm, flecks of light sparkled around it.

It's over.

Connie brought her hand to her mouth and gasped. Her lips trembled. Normally she was as slow as a turtle, but for once she seemed to have guessed what was happening.

"No...!"

She shook her head frantically, her voice unsteady as if she were wrenching it from deep in her throat.

"No-no-no, Scarlett...!"

So I'm going to disappear, right here? Scarlett wondered with peculiar detachment as she watched her body grow gradually more transparent.

It seemed she was vanishing because she had saved Connie.

Just as if she were here to right the wrongs not of ten years ago, but of right now.

But she had been so fixated on revenge! Calling this outcome a joke would be generous! All the same...

All the same, she felt deeply satisfied.

As soon as you feel your revenge is complete—

Suddenly, Hamsworth's voice ran through her memory.

—you will return to the realm of the gods.

Scarlett felt like laughing for no good reason. Connie was sobbing convulsively beside her. Her face was so hideous, Scarlett didn't even want to look at it.

So she laughed until she couldn't laugh any more.

"You should see your own face, Connie, you fool!"

She'd be damned if she was going to say good-bye. She lifted her chin proudly.

"I'll tell you something," she continued.

The girl Scarlett Castiel had met at the Grand Merillian was timid and unremarkable.

"You have an ordinary face, your handwriting is horrid, and you tend to say things you shouldn't."

She was clumsy, and whatever you had her do, she did with poor taste. But it was a mistake to assume she was weak-kneed. To the contrary, she was surprisingly bold.

"You're an idiotic fool, and you never listen when people tell you things."

Despite it all, you couldn't help liking her. Just when you thought you had her wrapped around your finger, you realized she was the one who had you

wrapped around hers.

“But Constance Grail,” Scarlett continued, smiling brightly before revealing her best-kept secret.

“I adore you!”

Connie stopped breathing and opened her green eyes as wide as they would go. Then her face crumpled, and she reached out her hands. Between sobs, she was crying something over and over.

Scarlett couldn't hear her anymore.

But she looked like she was trying so terribly hard, Scarlett smiled at her one last time—

—then vanished into thin air.





**Constance
Grail**

Sixteen-year-old who almost wrongfully had her head chopped off. Was traumatized by Scarlett's public execution ten years ago, now newly traumatized by watching Scarlett vanish before her eyes. ←new!



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old who might just have completed her revenge. Proves that her status as a trauma-inducing machine is still intact by proclaiming herself the heroine and then promptly vanishing. ←new!



**Randolph
Ulster**

Had been doing terribly after his fiancée was sentenced to death and broke off their engagement, and he had nothing up his sleeve to save her. Then, just when he was finally going to prove his worth, a self-proclaimed heroine had to come and steal the spotlight. In some ways, the biggest victim of all.



**Viscount
Hamsworth**

Has been upgraded from a pig with good eyes to a pig called "the queen's humble servant." ←new!



Lucia O'Brian

Drawing on her abilities as a survivor, takes Ulysses's hand and makes her escape as if she were reenacting the final scene from a certain movie.



Ulysses Faris

Has gone from captured princess to new bride whisked off by Dustin Hoffman.



Cecilia

Crown princess who grew up in an orphanage with the motto "All's well that ends well." Got off track and took a long detour to get there, but finally chose a path the people she loved could be proud of.



Before she knew it, she was passing through the sky, and the night, and the morning, over and over and over— She felt as if she were waking from a very long dream.

Scarlett slowly opened her eyes. Her head hurt. Where was she? Her memories were all mixed up. She looked around and concluded that she was inside some sort of rough carriage. Had she reached her destination, or was she just setting out? She wasn't sure, but the carriage had stopped.

"Get out," the man sitting next to Scarlett said, poking her in the back. What a rude lout! She tried to raise her hand but realized that manacles were fastened to both her wrists. Her fuzzy memory steadily cleared.

That's right. Scarlett Castiel was on her way to be executed.

How could she have forgotten? The rough carriage was the wagon taking her to the execution. This was Saint Mark's Square, and she was being taken to the executioner's block, where her head would be chopped off. But somehow, none of it felt real. Was the dream to blame?

Or had it even been a dream?

Scarlett was confused. It must have been a vision brought on by the fear of death. But it had been so horribly vivid.

Imagine, Scarlett Castiel becoming a vengeful ghost!

True, she wanted to plunge the scoundrels who had done this to her into a living hell, but would she really do something so clingy and miserable as become a ghost? She did have some pride, after all.

She adjusted her hood and stepped out of the carriage. Angry shouts and jeers greeted her. The torrent of abuse was appalling, but unfortunately for the people hurling the insults, her heart was not admirable enough to be hurt by such things. This execution was merely a show. Heckling like that was no different from an evening party waltz. Well, maybe a little noisier and less

elegant.

Luckily, she was used to being on display. She didn't mind being the center of attention, no matter the variety. To Scarlett, standing in front of that crowd was not so different from dancing at a ball. At least, that was what she told herself.

A light rain had begun to fall. When she reached the platform, one of the executioners ordered her to take off her cloak. His insolent attitude irritated her, but she knew it would be stupid to show her anger, so she shrugged her shoulders and obeyed.

The hair sticking to her neck bothered her, so she shook her head lightly, then slowly looked up.

At that instant, the storm of insults stopped. Every last person in the square was staring intently at her.

...Oh, it's all so predictable, she thought. It really is like a ball.

She looked around. Nobles were mixed in among the commoners. She recognized several faces.

The first acquaintance her gaze fell on was Emilia Caroling. Nothing had even happened yet, but she was already pale and quivering.

The woman with half her face covered by a fan must have been Deborah Darkian. Scarlett frowned slightly and mentally ran her finger across her throat. If the dream was true, Deborah would only be laughing for about ten more years. *Prepare yourself, you middle-aged hag.*

Lily was standing next to Deborah, probably to keep her in check. That wicked girl was showing her competitive streak even at a moment like this. She smiled her special, compassionate smile at Deborah, silencing whatever remark the other woman was trying to make at Scarlett. Lily was a detestable person, but Scarlett supposed she could admire her guts.

Suddenly, she noticed a young man hidden in the crowd, watching her. His expression was cold, but when his eyes met Scarlett's, his handsome face crumpled.

Scarlett held her breath for a few seconds, but then looked away, her

expression unchanged. It wouldn't do for her to start crying along with everyone else. If she did, that earnest man would probably feel even worse.

...Leticia must have gotten her crybaby streak from my brother.

Suddenly she remembered the bright, innocent niece she had met in her dream. She wasn't even born yet, but in the dream, Maximilian had called her Lettie. Just like he used to call Scarlett.

The dream had been so strange. It must have been what was making her calm in the face of death.

She scanned the crowd again and noticed a large man some distance away. Hamsworth.

People say that, when consumed, it can scramble a person's sense of time.

She recalled a conversation they'd had in her dream. They had been talking about the fruit juice she'd been given before getting into the wagon. Of course, his claim was absurd.

But what if...?

What if it hadn't been a dream?

What if some crazy phenomenon had occurred, and she really had jumped ten years into the future?

Scarlett smiled wryly to herself, rejecting the notion. *What a stupid thought.*

Anyhow, she had very little time left. There was no way she could find out the truth before she died.

Scarlett observed the crowd calmly. She took in every face, without missing a single one. They squirmed beneath her gaze.

No matter how hard she searched, she could not find her father, Adolphus, among the crowd. A mere *day ago*, that fact would have plunged her into despair. She would have concluded that he loved only his kingdom and had no love for his own daughter. But now she understood very clearly.

Her father, no—that *dunderhead*—had most likely gone to the palace as usual, with the usual expression on his face, and would return home as usual

that night.

And he would cry when no one was looking.

Your father is awkward and stubborn and very good at pretending he doesn't care.

She finally understood those words her mother had said with a smile.

And she realized something then.

Ah.

So that's what was going on.

"...Curse you."

The words flowed smoothly from her lips. *Yes, curse you. Curse you, Scarlett Castiel.*

If the dream was her future, and those things really would come true, then to hell with it. She might as well forget about pride and gossip and become a vengeful ghost.

"May every last one of you be damned!" she shouted, so every person in the square could hear her.

It was Scarlett's curse, and her declaration of war.

Issued to the world of ten years later.

"Wh-whore!" someone screamed.

"Harlot!" "Devil woman!" "Murderer!"

The jeers flew thick and fast.

The swelling malice seemed to know no limits. The crowd was swallowed in a vortex of abuse and fury. *It's all right*, she told herself again and again. *It wasn't a dream.*

Then show me the proof, another part of her asked coolly. *Show me it's more than a convenient fantasy.*

After all, Scarlett Castiel will die here a failure.

No! The frustration of having been set up by someone remained, and so did

the fear of death. But what upset her more than either of those things was the thought of that future never coming.

No! she thought again. She couldn't help it. For the first time, she felt terror.

She clenched her fists to hide the shaking of her hands. That was when it happened.

Right in front of her, she saw a small child turning her head from side to side.

Scarlett blinked at the out-of-place sight.

It was a little girl with her hazelnut hair in two braids. She must have been pushed to the front of the crowd. She was looking all around, clearly frightened by the abnormal fever of excitement in the square. The girl must have felt Scarlett's gaze, because she slowly looked up.

Her eyes, the color of fresh young grass, reflected back Scarlett's own form.

Ah, there it is.

Scarlett felt profoundly reassured. It hadn't been a dream. This girl had hazelnut hair and green eyes. And Scarlett Castiel never forgot a face. *It's all right. There's nothing for me to fear.*

A feeling of deep satisfaction filled her. Without meaning to, she smiled.

The child's eyes widened.

As Scarlett looked at her shocked face, she suddenly remembered the first time they met.

She was certain Connie had screamed when she saw her.

Her smile widened.

It's all right, she thought. It will be all right.

After all, now she knew that she, Scarlett, would have the last laugh.

And that meant...

"...I'll be waiting for you at the Grand Merillian."



I know you'll find me again.

The rain was beating down hard now. The wind howled. Black clouds swirled over the sky. Thunder rumbled, and a flash of white blotted out the world. And then—

And then—



Constance Grail

Plain, timid little girl who snuck out of her house to see an execution.



Scarlett Castiel

Extraordinarily beautiful duke's daughter labeled a notorious sinner and beheaded.



Dear Scarlett,

The afternoon sun isn't so hot these days, and there's a refreshing breeze over the golden fields. Harvest season has arrived. How have you been lately?

It's hard to believe two months have already passed since you left.

I know I ought to be happy that you were able to move on to the land of the goddesses.

But our parting was so sudden, I hope you will forgive a mere human like me for feeling a tiny bit resentful (although the point of this letter isn't to complain, it's to tell you what happened after you left, so no need to worry).

First, I'll tell you about the day I was supposed to be executed. Crown Princess Cecilia passed away. I heard she was shot down because she set Lucia and Prince Ulysses free. Nobody knows why she did such a thing despite being one of them. Out of consideration for the domestic and international repercussions of publicizing her true cause of death, they're saying she died of an unexpected heart attack. For better or worse, no one has questioned this—publicly, at least.

After Cecilia's funeral, Prince Enrique formally relinquished his succession rights. Someday soon, he plans to leave the palace for the domain given to him by His Majesty. The prince says it's a beautiful, lush place with lots of good memories, because it's where he first met you, Scarlett, and Lady Lily.

Lots of people have been arrested. The man calling himself Rufus May has been locked up in the First Royal Prison for his role as ringleader in the kidnapping of Prince Ulysses. Not only his accomplices but also many nobles with a connection to Daeg Gallus have been arrested. Jeorg Gaina is among them, and some of the families have had their titles and domains stripped. All sorts of other crimes have come to light, and society has been buzzing with gossip nonstop.

The events of ten years ago have finally been dragged into the light as well. We've learned that many of the nobles who lent a hand to Daeg Gallus back then have already been punished for a variety of crimes. Bribery, gambling, human trafficking... Don't you think it's a bit much for pure coincidence?

I suspect you're smart enough to guess who was behind those prosecutions.

I'm certain His Majesty and Duke Castiel were battling their invisible enemies

secretly all along. My hunch is they've been at it since the day they realized they would have to sacrifice you to their cause.

But on to happier news.

Scarlett, your name has finally been cleared.

Unfortunately, not all the facts from ten years ago have been made public. (If they were, Princess Cecilia and Prince Enrique would be implicated, which makes things difficult.)

Daeg Gallus has been blamed for engineering the plot—with a little dramatization and revision of the facts for public consumption. Aldous was kind enough to write up the whole story, including testimony from Aisha Huxley before her death, so I'll include a copy of that with this letter.

All the same, you're much in demand these days as the subject of songs and stories featuring the tragic young duke's daughter tossed about on the wild sea of fate.

Whenever I hear another glamorized version of your story, I feel like telling everyone that, in fact, you threw red wine on Cecilia when she was still a viscount's daughter and slapped her across the face in public. You always had such a knack for—

Oh dear, if I don't stop myself now, who knows what I'll say, so I'd better move on to another topic.

I hear Miss Alexandra ascended to the throne without further trouble and has been keeping everyone, especially Miss Eularia and Mr. Levine, on their toes. For now, the revitalization of Faris is her main concern, but everyone says that one day she will surely rebuild Faris's relationship with Adelbide. On the other hand, some people have been saying we must take our neighbor's recent actions seriously and immediately cut off diplomatic relations. Politics are so difficult! But I feel certain things will turn out all right. In time.

Prince Ulysses will study abroad next year in Soldita, his mother's homeland. Lucia said she plans to go see him there in summer. Walter's company is providing the ship, and they even invited me to go along. I haven't given them an answer yet, since it's still a long way off, but just the other day, I heard from someone that Duke Castiel entrusted them with Lady Aliénore's ashes. He said it was because he never once let her visit her family home after they married.

Lately, I've been trying to learn the language of Soldita, though it's not easy.

Oh, I almost forgot to tell you—thanks to her work reporting on my execution, Mylene has been hired by the Mayflower Company! She's working around the clock and says she's determined to become a role model for little girls who want to be

journalists.

This may come as a surprise, but Kate has been working as something like Miss Kimberly's private secretary. I'm afraid before long she'll be walking around with a pistol in place of a pie!

As you can see, some things have changed, and others haven't. (By the way, Hamsworth is as debauched as ever, and lately he's even put on a few more pounds.)

As for me, my life is nearly the same as it was before we met. I'm still a plain, unremarkable viscount's daughter, but I'm enjoying myself well enough.

Life without Scarlett Castiel is peaceful, calm, quiet—and a little boring.

So, in conclusion, let me say one final thing.

Scarlett, you're an idiot.

Shortly after Scarlett's innocence was recognized, her remains were transferred to the graveyard where members of the Castiel family had been interred for generations.

Her name was carved into elaborately decorated white marble. Duke Castiel oversaw the gravestone's creation directly, making sure it was fittingly beautiful for Scarlett Castiel.

Connie squatted down and gently placed the envelope containing her letter in front of the grave. She had barely mentioned recent events in her own life. She hoped that maybe if she didn't write about them, Scarlett would get curious and come visit her again.

But her life really hadn't changed that much.

What had changed were her surroundings.

Although she was still the daughter of the House of Grail, she not only had broken off two engagements, but had been taken into custody by the Royal Security Force, and to top it all off, she had nearly had her head chopped off. She was a living legend in the worst sense. No one in their right mind would want their name associated with hers. Maybe that was why there wasn't exactly a queue forming outside her door of applicants for the position of fiancé number three.

Except for one individual, that is.

Connie stood up slowly. Cautiously, a voice behind her asked, “Are you ready?”

She glanced over her shoulder. There was Randolph, as tall and manly as ever, dressed all in black even though today was his day off.

“What?” Randolph asked as she stared at him. Oddly enough, this man didn’t seem to care one bit what other people thought of him. Connie couldn’t help smiling.

“It’s a secret.”

“A secret?”

“Yes.”

Connie and Randolph still hadn’t renewed their engagement. Apparently, once you formally got the church to cancel an engagement, it wasn’t so easy to reinstate it.

Probably, if they asked Hamsworth, he would take care of it all right away, but Connie had been the center of public attention ever since her near-execution, and Randolph was occupied with wrapping up the related investigations. They had decided together that they would wait until things calmed down to do it.

Which meant that right now they were merely close friends—no, they loved each other, which made them proper sweethearts. For some reason, Randolph’s colleague Kyle Hughes was at his wit’s end over the situation.

Incidentally, Connie had decided that she would be the one to propose this time. To make sure Randolph didn’t accidentally do it first, she had informed him of her decision (about which he seemed dissatisfied—or was he anxious?).

Connie wondered what Scarlett would say if she knew all this. She would probably just laugh scornfully.

Suddenly, a playful mood came over Connie.

“Randolph?”

“What?”

When she said his name, he answered as if it was completely natural. That alone made her happy enough to grin.

“I just wanted to say your name.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

There was a silence. Randolph coughed, then glanced away and said in a low voice, “Connie.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“...I just wanted to say your name.”

Connie blinked in surprise, then laughed out loud. Randolph lowered his brow and held out his hand.

Wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes, Connie wrapped her fingers around his large palm.

Shortly after, she received an invitation from Hamsworth.

Surprisingly, it wasn't for a ball. Instead, he was holding an exhibition of paintings by an artist whose work he had been collecting for a while.

It was to be held at the Grand Merillian.

Connie gazed up at the splendid building with mixed feelings.

Before, on another evening, her life had been at a dead end. Her family had been heavily in debt, and the fiancé who was supposed to save them had cheated on her.

She had been wailing like some tragic heroine about how no one would save her.

She had been in despair, but when she looked back on it now, it all seemed so insignificant.

“What's wrong?” Randolph asked, peering at her as she stood frozen in the doorway of the palace. She shook her head, flustered.

“Nothing. I was just thinking how long ago it all feels, even though only a few

months have passed... I feel nostalgic, but for some reason, it hurts, too.”

She smiled wryly. “I see,” Randolph answered, placing his hand on her head.

They walked to the reception area in the grand hall, where Viscount Hamsworth was soothing a distressed noblewoman. The woman disappeared into a back room, leaning on the arm of her companion.

Connie blinked. “...Viscount Hamsworth?”

He tilted his flabby neck to the side.

“Well, if it isn’t Miss Grail. My goodness, how nice of you to come.”

“Thank you for inviting me. Um, was that lady all right?”

“Ah, she’s one of my guests. She seems to have encountered a stray dog in the garden. She says she’s too frightened to go home, so I was just on my way to call a guard.”

“A stray dog, you say?” Randolph murmured. “...What are your watchmen doing?”

“Ah, she may have been mistaken. Anyhow, although the Grand Merillian is on the castle grounds, it’s quite a bit more open than the palace where His Majesty lives. Perhaps the watchmen were slacking after all.”

Randolph sighed and grimaced.

“I suppose I’d better go check. Constance, please wait here.”

“B-but wait...!”

Before she could stop him, the admitted workaholic had vanished.

Sulking a little, she sat down on a sofa in the hall.

“Connie?” someone said.

She looked up. It was Mylene Reese.

“I knew it was you! So you came, too! Have you looked at the paintings?” she rambled at her usual lightning-fast tempo. “If you ask me, renting out the Grand Merillian to show off your private collection smacks a bit of new money. But what else can one expect from Viscount Hamsworth?”

She paused, peering around as if she'd just noticed her surroundings.

"You're here alone?"

"No, I came with Randolph..."

Connie explained that he'd abandoned her to chase some stray dog.

She suddenly felt sullen, but for some reason, Mylene was sniggering. What on earth was so funny?

They chatted about this and that for a few minutes, and then Mylene lowered her voice and said, "Oh, I almost forgot. Did you hear about Pamela?"

Connie's chest instantly tightened.

Pamela had been pilloried after Brenda Harris spoke out against her, and for a second time diagnosed as mentally unsound. Connie had heard that her symptoms were so severe, she could no longer go about ordinary life, let alone take part in the social scene.

"...What happened to Pamela?"

"I heard she was admitted to a hospital in the suburbs, but very recently, she passed away. People said she was quite unstable and may have taken her own life."

"...I see."

Connie looked down.

There was something else she hadn't included in her letter to Scarlett.

The storm had passed, but that didn't mean all the loose ends were neatly tied up.

True, Daeg Gallus had been routed from Adelbide, but the enormous organization was far from destroyed. Several of the perpetrators were still on the run. The whereabouts of the brother and sister who had kidnapped Ulysses were still unknown.

After a few more minutes, Mylene said she needed to head home. Randolph hadn't yet returned and was nowhere to be seen.

Connie stood up. She'd waited long enough. He could hardly blame her for

needing a change of scenery.

She walked through the grand hall to the conservatory. The glassed-in room with its white-painted window frames was just as it had been on that other evening. And just as then, the door to the garden was open.

Connie gazed up at the sky, a cool breeze caressing her cheek. It was a little colder than it had been in summer, but the sun was still strong. Clouds like fish scales covered the sky, softening the bright sunlight.

The sound of someone walking through grass brought her back to reality. She looked up, wondering who was there—and gasped.

“...Pame...la?”

Her pale golden hair was disheveled, and her clothes were as ragged as a beggar’s, but it was unmistakably Pamela Francis.

She was glaring unblinking at the ground, muttering something. “...Only...”

“What?” Connie asked, her shoulders suddenly tensing. Pamela was gripping a sharply pointed knife. As Connie stepped back, Pamela looked up. Her bloodshot eyes took the other woman in. Before Connie could say anything, Pamela raised the knife over her head and lunged at her.

“If only you never existed...!”

The knife descended slowly through the air, its blade glittering with reflected sunlight.

Somebody!

Connie gasped.

Somebody, save me!

She was frozen with fear. Her throat tightened, trapping her voice. Trembling, she looked around, but the conservatory was empty.

No one was coming to save her.

She closed her eyes in despair.

And then—

“Fine.”

An unexpected voice sounded in Connie’s ear.

“I’ll help you.”

Connie slowly opened her eyes. There was a flash like lightning. Pamela collapsed to the ground with a crackling sound.

A voice like a tinkling bell descended onto Connie as she stood in a daze.

“I see you’re as idiotic as always.”

The voice was haughty and insolent.

Yet somehow magnetic.

“But how...?” Connie sputtered.

It was none other than the coldhearted woman who had vanished into thin air without so much as a proper good-bye.

Scarlett Castiel looked down on Connie opening and closing her mouth like an oxygen-starved goldfish and snorted.

“Come now. If you stop to think about it, I didn’t get revenge on a single person.”

“Huh...?”

Connie blinked in shock.

Then she shook her head vehemently. “A single person” wasn’t quite accurate. She had at least slapped Duke Castiel. Hard, too. She even did a windup.

“All right, leaving aside my father, I haven’t yet shown any of those other fools a living hell.”

“And...?”

“When I thought about it, I got so angry...! I saw the white light, but then I turned around to come back and get my proper revenge!”

Scarlett planted her hand on her hip and tilted back her chin as if that had been the obvious decision.

Connie gaped at her.

“But aside from the revenge...,” she mumbled.

She’d practically passed on!

“Honestly! How rude of everyone, to refuse to wait for my revenge!”

This was quite the outrageous accusation.

“I thought about it, and I had a flash of inspiration.”

Scarlett’s amethyst eyes glittered with pleasure.

“Why not just spend the remaining eighty-four years of my life here, without regrets?”

What kind of bizarre logic was that?

Connie turned down her mouth. And who decided Scarlett got to live to one hundred? She was so arrogant and self-centered and absurd—but Connie couldn’t say any of that.

Her chest was burning with something she couldn’t put into words.

“I saved you, so you’d better not complain.”

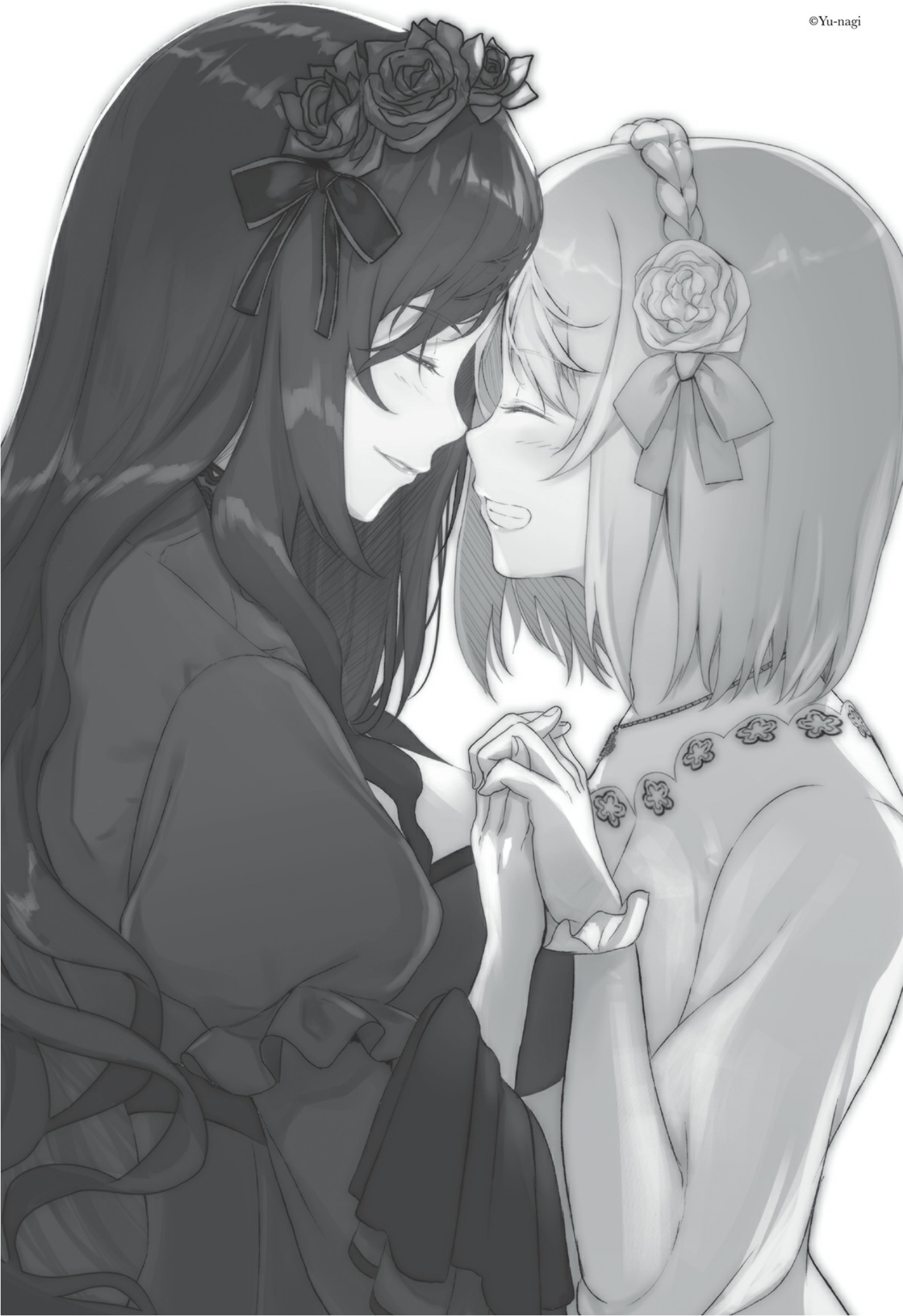
Through her tear-blurred vision, Connie could see Scarlett smiling happily and just a little shyly.

“Constance Grail, prepare yourself.”

The clouds were gone now, leaving behind a clear blue sky. The wind sang in the trees. The sky seemed to go on forever. The birds were chirping, and the sun was mild. Scarlett continued.

“From here on out, I demand that you devote your life to making sure I get my revenge!”

This is the story of a plain young woman, the sort you can find anywhere, who gets sucked into helping a notorious vixen exact revenge *for the rest of her life*.



[List of Current Characters]



**Constance
Grail**

Sixteen-year-old whose motto is "Be sincere." Plain, average girl with nothing whatsoever to distinguish her. Currently doesn't have a fiancé, but has an impressive sweetheart and an equally impressive partner-in-crime. Will be helping said partner reap revenge for the next eighty-four years. ←new!



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old whose motto is "What's yours is mine and what's mine is mine." Definitely a ghost, but has a stubborn, reckless, idiotic partner-in-crime and an unpredictable hanger-on she can't seem to get away from. To get revenge on the idiots who went and died, plans to enjoy herself in the world of the living for another eighty-four years. ←new!



**Randolph
Ulster**

Possibly airheaded twenty-six-year-old who's always going off script. Currently doesn't have a fiancée, but has a sweetheart who could do anything at any moment and who comes with an accomplice. Will probably be at their mercy for the rest of his life, but at least it will be interesting. ←new!



Kyle Hughes

Workaholic with outrageously good looks. Still chasing bad guys with a huge smile on his face. Used to make fun of people who talked about love and romance, but after seeing how much fun two of his acquaintances are having with it, has started to consider trying it out for himself. ←new!



**Enrique
Adelbide**

Crown prince who would prefer not to be called careless. After Cecilia's death, bought the land where her orphanage once stood and turned it into a graveyard for her and the nuns and children who died in the fire there. Has recently started to develop bald patches, so is asking his balding buddy Kendall Levine for advice on hair growth tonics. ←new!



**Viscount
Hamsworth**

Eternal nouveau riche pig who held the ball at the Grand Merillian that started it all. Hopelessly debauched, but maybe not quite as worthless as he looks. Still can't forget about his first love from ten years ago, now happily serving as her humble-servant-slash-love-slave.



Lucia O'Brian

Duke's daughter with the attributes of a battle-tested hero. Will continue exposing herself to life's dangers by sticking her neck into difficult situations, but will typically find a way out with her quick wit and sixth sense. Will probably remain close with the trouble-prone Ulysses for many years to come.



Ulysses Faris

Prince with the attributes of a heroine who has become slightly tougher than he used to be. Nevertheless, still a damsel in distress, and will often get into trouble while studying abroad in Soldita. Each time, Lucia will run to his rescue all the way from Adelbide.



Shoshanna

Can't forget what a certain strange little girl said to her once and therefore makes up her mind to leave her brother Salvador and live a clean life. For some reason, however, he ends up coming with her.



Salvador

Has no choice but to leave the organization after his spoiled little sister announces she's going to live by herself despite being totally incapable of anything. His new job is as a jack-of-all-trades specializing in playing the tough guy.



Alexandra Faris

The original bully. Has made every one of her siblings except for good little Ulysses cry. Used to want to become a mercenary and travel the continent, but changed her mind after realizing what bad shape her kingdom was in. Currently working all out to rebuild Faris, although her extremely poor sense of direction and tendency to get out of control are difficult for her advisers to cope with.



Eularia

Currently working all out to clean up the messes of a certain strong-willed person with a very bad sense of direction. Thought she was doing a good job of balancing praise with criticism, but maybe due to her exhausting job, has recently shifted to pure criticism, and is therefore being treated as a walking time bomb. Technically Alexandra's right-hand woman, but any day now might break out her golden right hook.

Theophilis Faris

Fourth prince who lost the royal game of musical chairs. Still on the alert for a chance at the throne, but keeps getting overloaded with annoying jobs by his tyrannical sister. Jack-of-all-trades and master of none, he grumbles but still manages to get it all done. Now drinking buddies with Kendall Levine.



Pamela Francis

The ultimate twisted girl, has been stockpiling grudges ever since crawling back out of the well, and now she's coming up behind Connie like the ghost in a horror movie, making you want to yell, "Connie, watch out! Behind you!" Will probably end up in some convent on the edge of a sheer cliff, full of cold-blooded women like Fräulein Rottenmeier. Has hated Constance since the moment she met her and continues to hate her now, which is why she has been spending her days uttering low-grade curses such as "May that detestable girl stumble over her own feet" and "May she shrink day by day until she's too short for her fiancé." ←new!



Neil Bronson

Sheltered son of the Bronson Company, who would like to remain an eternal virgin at heart. Was once a contemptible city boy, but the ministrations of a certain married woman turned him into pure white ash. Obviously, he lost owing to a lack of experience. As a result, it looks like he won't be marrying anytime soon. Before long, company employees will doubtless start calling him "the guy who's still not married." As for his relationship with his former fiancée, he is less like an old friend and more like a maid she pushes around.



Abigail O'Brian

The original average-looking woman. Thanks to her ability to blend into the crowd, has been able to continue her efforts to save the world with her loyal hound from her outpost on Rosenkreuz Street. Whenever anyone disparages her looks, she tells them the world just hasn't caught up with her yet.

Theodore O'Brian

Nickname "Teddy." Mascot of the House of O'Brian. Never did make an appearance in the story.



Aldous Clayton

Abby's loyal hound and commander of the House of O'Brian's attack force. As long as Abby and Teddy are happy, doesn't care about anything else. Lately added Lucia to the list. ←new!

Walter Robinson

Believes in Abigail above all else. Weirdly enough, doesn't mind eternally playing the role of teaser stallion. His employees find his obsession with Abigail genuinely creepy. Seems likely to marry his straitlaced secretary on a drunken impulse.



Ernst Adelbide

Scarlett's top candidate for slapping, but Connie's weak point. Having a hard time figuring out the truth since Connie avoids him like the plague out of fear of being executed for lèse-majesté. The days when Scarlett was a newborn and he, Adolphus, and their friends could still laugh together were probably the happiest of his life.



Adolphus Castiel

Don't tell anyone, but he has finally regained his taste for black tea after hating it for ten years.



Maximilian Castiel

Picture-perfect, serious honors student. Has the vague feeling he's the only one being left out of some secret, but is having a difficult time saying he'd like to be part of the club.



Kimberly Smith

Still living the 007 lifestyle, still wearing pink every day.

Kate Lorraine

Impressed Kimberly Smith with her quiet, gentle personality that makes everyone let their guard down and her courage in the face of adversity, leading to a job as a personal secretary. Had to put off thoughts of marriage as a result, but doesn't care because the pay is good.

Mylene Reese

Novice reporter for the *Mayflower*. Talent aside, she has passion in spades. Tends to stick her nose into shady situations in search of scoops, pulling in her friends Connie and Kate.

Leticia Castiel

Comes off as an overbearing noble in the making, turns out to simply be a shy, thoughtful angel. Definitely like her father in that respect. Since she's a Castiel, will likely grow into a cool beauty that everyone envies. However, she isn't the type to be manipulative or two-faced. Will surely stay friends with Lucia forever.

Percival Layli Grail

Cute young boy whose motto is "Be sincere." His sister will probably start taking him to the O'Brian and Castiel residences soon. Might even study abroad and become friends with a certain young prince.



Lily Orlamunde

Winner who gave the middle finger to fate and fought till the end.

Probably smiling with satisfaction right now.

It was the night of the failed public execution. As she huddled around a campfire with Salvador, Shoshanna told him she didn't want to do wrong anymore—that if he would allow it, she wanted to distance herself from Daeg Gallus and live alone.

“That so?” her brother muttered like it didn't matter. Then he lit the end of a stick on fire—and pressed it onto his left arm. She could hear it sizzling into his skin and smell burning cloth and flesh. She screamed.

“W-w-what are you doing, Salvador...?!”

“What? Ouch! Hey, be a little gentler... That hurts!”

She was scrambling to treat his wound, and the last step was to apply an ointment that stung so horribly that death was almost preferable. That was what drew the rare yelp from his mouth. But at least it was unlikely to get infected. The sun tattoo on his upper arm was now obliterated by a horrible burn. It had been the symbol of his membership in the organization.

“Why did you do that...?”

“Why? You said you were done with this line of work, didn't you?”

Shoshanna nodded, though she was confused by his casual tone and incoherent explanation.

“Then getting out is my only choice. You're as stubborn as an ass once you've made up your mind.”

“...What does me being stubborn have to do with you leaving the organization?”

“Huh? You don't seriously think you can make it out there alone, do you? You're still a kid! What a joke. Someone will pluck you off the street and sell you before you can blink—if you're lucky.”

Shoshanna stared at him openmouthed. Salvador frowned suspiciously.

“What?”

“...I thought you’d abandon me.”

She knew it was an ungrateful, selfish thing to say. But she had been ready for him to respond by cutting off ties with her out of disillusionment and disgust.

“I’d love to. But you know I can’t. You’re too much of a bother.”

“A b-bother?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. *You are a bother*. Have been ever since you were a baby. I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to strangle you for crying so damn loudly, but every time you saw me, you smiled. I couldn’t abandon you then, and I sure as hell can’t now. It’s easier to just give in.”

She’d never been able to understand his logic when he talked like this, speaking of himself as if it had nothing to do with him.

“...But won’t they kill you for leaving the organization?”

“Kill me?” He snorted like she’d made a really funny joke. “Okay, I’ll say I died. Lucky for us, that sharp-eyed bastard Krishna is gone now.”

He turned to Shoshanna.

“So what do you want to do next?”

“...I want to help people. I want to be there for them. That’s the kind of life I want.”

“Oh man, you sure are a pain,” he answered instantly, sounding exhausted. But Shoshanna wasn’t discouraged.

“Listen, Salvador, I’m done with being the one who’s protected all the time.”

There was a silence. Salvador sighed very reluctantly.

“Man, oh man, are you ever a pain,” he said, standing up like he was done with her. Shoshanna’s heart sank. Her shoulders slumped. Then she felt someone mussing her hair.

“Well, just do what you wanna do.”

The reddish-gold eyes looking down at her were surprisingly soft.

“I’m never any match for you anyway,” he added, like she really was the most bothersome person he had ever met.

As they passed through the market in a town on Adelbide’s border, Salvador said, as if he’d just remembered, “Hey, you wanted a parakeet, didn’t you? The pets are gone now, so how ’bout I buy you one?”

The reason she’d wanted a parakeet was because she’d felt like a little caged bird herself.

Shoshanna stopped walking and slowly shook her head.

“I don’t want one anymore.”

She looked up at the sky, one hand shading her eyes. Overhead, birds were flying freely through a big, wide, clear blue world.

I guess I just have terrible timing.

Guards handcuffed the unconscious Pamela and carried her off. Randolph watched out of the corner of his eyes as they left, an inscrutable expression on his face.

He wasn't sure what he'd done wrong. He didn't think he'd been away from the Grand Merillian for all that long. Or maybe the problem was that he'd allowed himself to be distracted from his sweetheart by a stray dog in the first place? He did feel bad about that. He never had found the dog, and at this point, he suspected that what Viscount Hamsworth's guest had seen wasn't a dog at all, but rather Pamela Francis wandering around like a ghost.

The point was, he never would have forgiven himself if something had happened to Constance. Fortunately, she hadn't been injured. Until a moment ago, she had been sobbing without any concern for the people watching, but now she seemed to be calming down.

"...Are you all right?" he asked solicitously. Constance slowly raised her head. An enormous tear sprang from one of her green eyes. Randolph reached out almost unconsciously and gently wiped it away. Then he soothingly combed his fingers through her hair. Her shoulders convulsed, and finally she began talking in a tearful voice.

According to her, Scarlett Castiel, who should have been in the realm of the goddesses by now, had abruptly returned, and Constance had once again been pulled into helping her exact revenge.

For the next *eighty-four years*.

"...Isn't that a bit long?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

It *was* long, by any standard. He wondered if the goddesses had chased her

back to earth because they couldn't stand her excessively arrogant personality.

"By the way, I've been wondering about something," Randolph said, taking the opportunity to ask her a question that had been on his mind. "How much time does Scarlett normally spend with you?"

Constance looked at him like the question didn't make sense.

"How much time? Well, she's an early riser, so she's usually there when I wake up."

"When you wake up...?"

"Yes. And then she stays with me until I go to sleep."

"Until you go to sleep...?"

He frowned reflexively. All else aside, the two of them *were* a couple.

"...It's just that, in the future, when we live together..."

Well, in other words, it seemed as if...

"That might be an obstacle to—to various things—" he blurted out without really thinking, then suddenly stopped. He felt like he'd said something terribly improper.

For better or worse, Constance didn't seem to notice. Or rather, she seemed focused on something else. She looked extremely serious, deep in thought.

After a moment, she looked up, apparently having made up her mind.

"Um, it's not just Scarlett I want to spend all my time with."

"...Hmm?"

"Um, well, I'd also like you to be there..."

"Me?"

He tilted his head in surprise. She looked back at him with unexpected directness.

"Would you always stay by my side, as well?"

He'd been prepared for something a little more substantial. He nodded, feeling slightly let down.

“All right.”

Constance looked vaguely dissatisfied. She took a step closer to him.

“Are you sure? I mean always and forever.”

“Um, yes,” he said, slightly overwhelmed. She frowned suspiciously.

“Are you sure you understand? When I say forever, I mean forever. Even when I’m a wrinkled old lady hobbling around.”

Randolph burst out laughing at her intensity.

“Yes, I understand.”

This time his response was clear enough to draw a happy smile from her.

“I’m serious about this, and I’ve been up front with you. You can’t go back on your word later. Scarlett heard you promise, too...!”

He suddenly grew sullen at the thought that Scarlett was there with them even now.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there until the end... Well, at least for the next eighty-five years.”

Damn it, he’d slipped again. He groaned at himself. Why did he have to be so competitive?

This time Constance seemed to have noticed. Her eyes grew round, and she blinked several times.

Then she smiled softly.

That smile, escaping her as if she couldn’t contain her happiness, was too much for him. He reached out and placed his hand on her cheek, drawing her toward him.

Her green eyes wavered with surprise, then narrowed bashfully.

As long as she could still smile like that, he supposed it was all right if Scarlett was there with them.

Of course, he knew he’d already lost the battle if he was thinking that way.

He smiled wryly. He could almost hear the cackling of the notorious vixen

herself.



In his office at the palace, Adolphus Castiel scanned the letter that had just arrived and smiled.

“What’s the creepy smile for?”

The rude comment came from none other than King Ernst, who was working in the same room. No doubt this self-important man was the only person in the kingdom who could get away with saying such a thing about the duke’s face, which was rumored to only grow handsomer with age. Of course, Ernst wasn’t just self-important—he genuinely *was* important.

He paused in pressing his seal onto some documents to give the duke a curious look. Apparently wanting to know the cause of the duke’s uncharacteristically amused expression, he slowly stood, walked over to Adolphus, and looked over his shoulder.

“A letter?”

He glanced at the bundle of envelopes on the desk and quickly realized that their frilly, lacy bows and ribbons were not type of correspondence the duke normally received.

“...Don’t tell me they’re from a woman?”

“Not *a* woman, *two* women,” Adolphus announced cheerfully.

The king, who had always been a man of impeccable morals in that respect, grimaced in disgust.

“You’ll get yourself in trouble one of these days, stringing along multiple women...”

“I regret to inform you I’ve already been slapped,” Adolphus answered with a shrug. Ernst stared at him, dumbfounded.

“But I think she’ll forgive me.”

As he smiled happily, the king took several steps backward, still in shock.

After safely distancing himself from Adolphus, this rude, self-important man

coughed uncomfortably.

“...Well, I can’t say I approve of the reason, but I’m relieved to see you looking so happy.”

“Relieved?”

“Indeed. You look as if you might even live for another decade or two.”

Adolphus blinked slowly in surprise, then turned his gaze on Ernst.

“At least as long as my letters continue to be answered,” he muttered.

This seemed to reassure Ernst.

How strange, Adolphus thought, that this man and I were born on the same day. People used to call us twins when we were young because our eyes are the same color.

For some reason, he found himself thinking about those memories.

“...As for the two women...,” he continued, as if he hadn’t heard a word of Ernst’s advice. “It seems that one of them has finally gotten engaged to the man she loves.”

“...Engaged? Wait a minute now, Adolphus, how old are they?”

“Curious, are you? In that case, I’ll introduce you one of these days.”

“Oh no, I’m already quite afraid of them. I think I’d rather not.”

“You’ll be fine. Although I suspect you’ll get a good slap yourself.”

“Eh...?” Ernst said, at a loss for words. The blood drained from his face, and he shook his head. “No, I think I’ll pass.”

For some reason, this amused Adolphus greatly. He smiled again.



Oh no. I can’t keep a straight face.

Standing before the altar in the room of the church where oaths were taken, Hamsworth counted silently to ten in an effort to remain solemn. However debauched in body and spirit he might be, he didn’t have the guts to laugh in a situation like this. His life was too precious to him.

Hamsworth was performing the second engagement ceremony for a certain bothersome couple.

Not just a couple, strictly speaking—a threesome that included a notorious vixen.

“Are you certain this man is the one? If you’re going to change your mind, now’s the time. You know as well as me how unpredictable and antisocial he is, and on top of that, he hasn’t the faintest notion of how a woman’s heart works. Just you wait and see, nothing good will come of this!”

Constance Grail had been listening to a constant stream of this since she entered the room, and even she was beginning to get a distant look in her eyes.

“Don’t listen to her, Constance,” said Randolph Ulster, crossing his arms over his chest. He was dressed in his military uniform and looked cranky. “Am I right that Scarlett is haranguing you with nonsense again?”

“Um, well...”

“Leave her alone. You’re just sulking.”

“What did you say?” Scarlett said, a scowl twisting her beautiful face. She pointed at Hamsworth. “Hamsworth! Tear up that contract immediately!”

“Scarlett, what are you saying?” Connie yelled. “And Viscount, please don’t look so happy!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t help it. It’s been so long since she addressed me.”

After all, he was Scarlett’s eternal servant.

Nevertheless, the document set in front of the altar was important proof of their engagement. Of course, he could have shredded it as his mistress demanded, but having another one drawn up would take time, and he did hate paperwork.

As he was deciding what to do, Randolph made a move. Although he couldn’t have heard Scarlett, he must have guessed what was happening all the same.

“Listen to me, Scarlett Castiel,” he said, looking serious. “I am going to spend the rest of my life making Constance Grail happy.”

His cerulean eyes were filled with determination, which made him look a little less severe.

“I’d appreciate a bit more trust from you,” he continued with a wry smile.

Constance’s face flushed pink at the sudden declaration of devotion. Scarlett appeared taken aback for a moment, but quickly turned her face away and clenched her shaking fists.

“.....Ergh,” she finally said in a very low voice, clearly trying to hold something inside.

“What?” Constance asked. Hamsworth tilted his head.

“Can’t you figure it out?!” she snapped back.

As if in response to her anger, the room began to shake.

The windows clattered in their frames, and benches toppled over. A crack splintered the stained-glass panel of the Moirai, the three Fates.

Constance was white as a sheet. Her companion was rubbing his temples and sighing.

Meanwhile, Hamsworth’s supreme goddess stood imposingly with one hand on her hip as if to say, *And what of it?*

It’s impossible. I’m definitely going to laugh.

Unable to hold it in any longer, Hamsworth shook so hard with mirth, he almost fell over.



Why is this happening to me?

Surveying the wrecked room after the storm had passed, Constance Grail grimaced.

She just couldn’t see how she was going to survive this. Her stomach and her head both hurt. Suddenly, a shadow fell over her. She looked up. A pair of amethyst eyes were gazing down at her. The puzzled look on Scarlett’s face suggested that never in a million years would it occur to her that she might be the reason Connie felt ready to die of frustration.

To the contrary, her magnificently confident smile all but said, *If you've got a problem, just leave it to me!*

Scarlett's smile made Connie suddenly feel silly for being so upset. And before she knew it, she, too, was smiling from ear to ear.

AFTERWORD

It's been so hot these days, it almost feels like the sun is letting herself go. But recently it's leveled off, and as the earlier sunsets bring a sense of autumn, I have only one thought.

I want to eat one of those burgers with the fried egg you can only get at this time of year.

Coincidentally, this trilogy also ends in the fall, and sometimes I wonder, as I stare up at yet another crisp autumn sky, if Connie used to look up at that same expanse.

This season also always reminds me of certain events from my high school days. All right, I'll be honest—one event in particular: the Death March, aka the forced field trip from hell.

It was only a walking race, but unfortunately, my school took it quite seriously. How seriously? Well, we had to gather when it was still dark out, depart at dawn, and for some reason, run several dozen kilometers to the neighboring prefecture. Basically, it was a military march.

Yes, we had to run. And at a decent pace, too. Why? Because rest stops had been set up, and if we didn't get to them by a set time, we couldn't stop there.

Once I found that out, I realized something. "Aha, I see," I said.

This would not be the kind of field trip I was used to.

Being a perennial nonparticipant in any and all sport activities, I quickly decided to decline to complete the race and announced my imminent forfeiture. Unfortunately, when I waved the white flag, everyone acted like I was crazy. It was finish line or bust for these people. Gym class also consisted exclusively of marathons. The actual task was simple, of course—just run. Run and run and run.

As I ran, I realized one thing.

Yeah, this was going to be impossible.

Perhaps sensing a lack of enthusiasm among a certain group of students headed by my gutless self, our veteran-gym-teacher-aka-demon-sergeant furtively shared the secret to finishing long-distance races.

“Listen up, kids. If you want to finish the race, do not under any circumstance aim for the finish line.”

“Excuse me? I don’t understand.”

The battle-hardened sergeant, who every year whipped hundreds of students into marathon shape, answered with extreme solemnity.

To be specific, we were supposed to aim for the person in front of us, not the finish line.

Obviously, I deemed this advice total BS and waited for the dreaded day to arrive.

Then, when it did, I was predictably full of regret. And I was terrified. Even though I planned to give up, I was terrified. Of what? Well, I’d never once in my life run even a few kilometers, let alone a few dozen. Plus, we weren’t going to be on the familiar school track. We were going to be on a road I’d never seen before.

As I was standing there in a panic, everyone else took off down the road and left me behind. That was terrifying, too.

That’s when I remembered the words I’d brushed off as a joke.

Like an idiot with no other strategy, I started running desperately toward the back of the person ahead of me. I passed them, aimed for the next person, passed them, and before I knew it, there was the road marker for the neighboring prefecture. Unbelievably, I’d made it.

If I’d put any effort into preparing, I might have felt a sense of accomplishment or joy, but what I actually felt was closer to bewilderment.

It was the next day before I even truly realized I’d finished the race. My whole body felt like I was a voodoo doll someone had stuck pins in, and my arms and

legs were shaking like a newborn fawn's. But I understood.

This is what it feels like to go past my limit.

Ultimately, two things got me to the finish line: the demon sergeant's advice, and the unknown fellow combatants running in front of me who made it to the end.

And now, with that monumental run-up (don't worry, I already know I haven't said anything important), I'd like to give thanks for all the help that allowed me to finish this other race alive, too. That's all I was trying to say.

The only difference between my present self and my high school self is that, this time, when I broke through the finish line tape, I felt so happy, I could have jumped for joy.

So allow me to express my gratitude to one and all.

To my editor, thank you once again for running alongside me from start to finish, occasionally leading the way, and being the reason I can say with pride, "This is my book...!" I am in awe of the technical and artistic skill that enables you to fit all the character blurbs onto the page even when I go crazy and keep adding more and more out of excitement.

To Yu-nagi, I take off my hat to you for always thinking so deeply about what the characters are feeling and what expressions they're making, and on top of that, figuring out how to draw them most effectively. I also admit to sobbing over the way every illustration practically jumps off the page. I knew they were going to be great, but I was still bowled over. You're practically a saint.

Hinase Momoyama, your comic version of the story has exactly the mood I wanted to create. The characters are even more vivid and appealing, the tempo of the dialogue is exquisite, and most important, the facial expressions are incredible. The magnetism you create is out of this world.

By the way, my personal feeling is that the scenes where Teresa is murdered and where Randolph proposes are better in the comic version than the novels.

A thousand different feelings of gratitude are crowding my heart like a traffic jam during Golden Week, but lastly, I'd like to sing a chorus of "thank-yous" to everyone who has read this far.

Because you exist, I was able to have the incredible experience of writing this trilogy. I almost feel guilty for being the one who got to have all the fun. To make up for it even a little, let me conclude by promising to earnestly pray for world peace from this day onward.

Kujira Tokiwa

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